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**ROMAIN ROLLAND**  
**THE STORY OF A CONSCIENCE**



*Romain Rolland*

# ROMAIN ROLLAND

THE STORY OF A CONSCIENCE

BY

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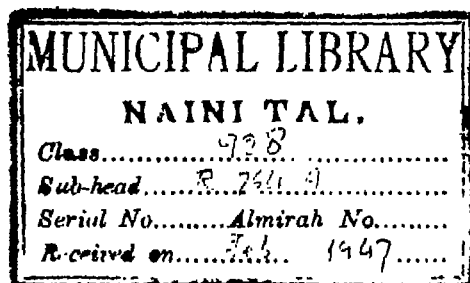
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## INTRODUCTION

The story of Romain Rolland's conscience is the story of his age. In it are reflected the moral and intellectual aspirations of innumerable individual existences, their striving for truth, their convictions, their faith.

The story of this conscience is the story of solitude and isolation in the midst of a frustrated multitude which, having lost its beliefs, is aimlessly drifting in the storm of conflicting passions and ideologies.

The story of this conscience is the story of an unceasing effort at creation regardless of all the obstacles that prejudice and inertia might put in its way.

Critics are impatient with the conscience of a writer who hesitates and stumbles and who sometimes misses the right word at the right time. They do not realize that "the right word" is, more often than not, the result of a long drawn-out struggle, the fulfilment that comes to the writer after many painful attempts at integration.

Romain Rolland's life-story is the story of these attempts at integrating reality and the truth that lies hidden beneath the ruins of a dying time. Though he lived and worked in the present, he was a child of the past. Goethe and Tolstoy, Michel Angelo and Beethoven, Ramakrishna and Shakespeare, are his intellectual ancestors; the Italian Renaissance, Elizabethan England, the French Revolution and Napoleon,



the religious revival in the India of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, are the great hours of the spirit that have formed him. The laughing vineyards of Burgundy, the palaces of imperial Vienna, the Vatican at Rome, and the valley of the Ganges, are the landscapes which were to his mind a never ending source of creative joy. And all the masters of the past, the events that gave shape to the civilizations of Europe and Asia, and the landscapes that provide a natural continuity in the history of man's struggle for perfection, these, all alike are part of Rolland's cultural heritage.

The story of Romain Rolland's conscience is the story of a writer's integration of the past. Only by taking roots in the tradition that once gave meaning to human endeavours could he discover the future.

And the future is what the conscience of many like him wants it to be. For a new age is born out of the conflicts of the present. And while countless consciences were torn by a dividing conflict of loyalties. Rolland worked in silence and seclusion for the only loyalty worth fighting for: the future of man, the fulfilment of his longing for intelligent social reconstruction, his craving for a new faith that would again give significance to life.

The story of Rolland's conscience is the story of helplessness in the face of collective insanity, of pain and insults inflicted upon him by thoughtless and frustrated people, of an unceasing sacrifice for the sake of an ultimate truth.

We cannot say whether he ever attained the goal. Nor do we wish to judge the success or failure of his attempts. We are here to tell a story that fascinated

many, but the implications of which only few understood. For the story of Rolland's life is the story of the conscience of Europe during the last sixty years. His uncertainty belonged to countless men and women in the West, his search for truth provided so many others who had lost their way with a new awareness, his fulfilment in defeat reflected the struggle and the anguish of a whole continent.

And we shall follow him in his adventure of the human mind neither as critics nor as disciples. We shall climb together with him the peak of the mountain. And although we shall leave the plains far below, we shall never lose sight of them. For the conscience of a creative mind reflects both the summit and the valleys, the greatness of human achievements and the roots from which that greatness draws its inspiration.

A. A.





## I

# APPRENTICESHIP

IF it is true, as psychologists say, that the experiences of our earliest childhood determine our character, personality and even outlook on life for all times to come, then Rolland's first fascination for music must be counted among the most profound influences of his life. Music, the most self-centred and abstract of all the arts, the attempt to communicate through sounds the innermost being of our soul; music, the struggle for harmony in a childhood full of discordant elements, the child's first stammering to express the delight of the senses in terms of sounds—"like bells heard far off, coming near the wind, and then going away again; then when you listen you hear in the distance other voices, different, joining in and droning like flying insects; they seem to call to you, to draw you away farther—farther into the mysterious regions where they dive down and are lost ..."<sup>1</sup> Out of the chaos of conflicting voices, the disharmonies of purely instinctual perception, the young man creates a cosmos of his own. He infuses meaning and order in a succession of vibrating strings and tubes and drums, a meaning, however, that belongs to himself alone, born of his own experiences. And still it is the experience of nature, the for ever changing universe around us, that moves him to self-expression, "everything that throbs or moves or stirs, or palpitates, sunlit summerdays, nights when the

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(1) *Jean Christophe*, (*The Dawn*), I, p. 37.

wind howls, flickering light, the twinkling of the stars, storms, the song of the birds, the buzzing of insects, the murmuring of trees,"<sup>2</sup> and again voices of those whom he loves or hates with all the warm intensity of youth.

All that is music. And when the young man grows to maturity these voices, these sensual perceptions, are transformed into a new will to live, an attitude, a conscience born of suffering and joy; and above the personal experience, the newly born conscience and attitude, there will be an age to express, its forms and beliefs and values. For such is the musician's strange evolution: from the personal experience to impersonal expression is but a short step, and time with all its ephemeral vicissitudes and virtues, its sarabandes, its minutes, its walses, becomes one again with eternity, its sonatas, its fugues, its symphonies. And if musicians attach an almost mystical value to their art, it is because even in the first trembling attempts of the child on the confusing keyboard of a piano, eternity is waiting round the corner. And when it bursts in upon the child, like a sudden storm through the open window at night, a new conscience is born, new values are revealed, a new attitude is formed out of the raw material of life.

## II

In the small township of Clamecy, in Burgundy, Romain Rolland saw first the light of day. Born a few years before the Franco-Prussian war, on the 29th January 1866, the span of his life reaches across three wars, a defeat at the beginning and another defeat at

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(2) *Ibid* I, p. 78.

the end, and a doubtful victory in the middle. In the midst of such cataclysmic events, the growing fanaticism of the masses, armies for ever on the march, advancing in victory and withdrawing in defeat, the contradictory clamours of the press, bloodshed and revolutions spreading like wildfire across Europe, he withdrew into himself from his earliest childhood. Introspective from a very early age, he found solace in music and in books. He discovered Beethoven and Shakespeare; and for a solitary child in the French province with its drab and monotonous existence, these discoveries must have had a very profound effect. They became his own, his most cherished personal possessions; he lived through them in an unreal, self-created world. It almost seemed already then as though Beethoven and Shakespeare had become one and the same person to him, expressing sometimes in sounds, sometimes in words, the same vital joy to live.

Soon he left the rural landscape of Burgundy, and the family shifted to Paris where Rolland spent his schooldays. Later on he gained entrance into the *Normal School*, the most exclusive and intellectually advanced of all French educational institutions. There, in cloistral seclusion, the future intellectual elite of France is being trained. There also Rolland came in touch for the first time with the intellectual leaders of the future generation. It is no accident that three of the greatest representatives of modern French idealism, Paul Claudel, André Suarez, and Charles Peguy, should have been his contemporaries in the *Normal School*. What bound them to each other was indeed at first a common uncertainty, a lack of con-

victions—so representative of the period following the first fall of France. But already we perceive the first glimmering of that idealism which was going to shake up France twenty years later. Instead of following the complacent naturalism of Zola or Maupassant, the positivism of Comte or the sociology of Durkheim, they turned towards Shakespeare as their common God. A further bond of union was their passion for the music of Wagner. And lastly there came Tolstoy, the genius who stood above all the trivialities of life and who taught them that no pragmatic science will ever be able to solve the ultimate problems of existence. Many years later, Rolland exclaims: "Our sympathies went out to him. Our love for Tolstoy was able to reconcile all our contradictions. Doubtless each one of us loved him for a different motive, for each one of us alike he opened a gate into an infinite universe; for all he was a revelation of life."<sup>1</sup> The three masters who created life for them, Shakespeare, Wagner and Tolstoy, were, significantly enough, all of them great re-creators of values; and in their work this group of young students found a sure indication of the birth of a new world. It was also during that time that Rolland, in the year 1888, wrote his *Credo*, his spiritual testament, a confession of all his beliefs and convictions. This *Credo* has never been published, but all through his life Rolland refers to it again and again as the very foundation of his spiritual life.

Another contemporary of Rolland in the *Normal School* was Henri Bergson who at that time was a young lecturer there. He was just then getting ready his book on *Matter and Memory* and was one of the

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(1) Romain Rolland : *Life of Tolstoy*.

most popular teachers at the *School*. Indeed Bergson's teaching helped those young idealists to free themselves of old prejudices. It almost seemed to them as though Bergson gave them back a long lost freedom of thought and emotion. Many years later Rolland acknowledges his debt to him: "What they do not forgive Bergson is that he has broken our chains."<sup>1</sup> A philosophy based on the principle of intuition and the *Plan vital* could not but appeal to the rising generation of young Frenchmen. Brought up in an atmosphere of frustration and dejection, they almost instinctively turned towards a new master who could show them the hidden door beyond which there was a new joy of life and new values worth living for. Bergson and Romain Rolland are contemporaries in more than one sense. Although their paths soon separated, the one being increasingly absorbed in problems of philosophy and metaphysics, the other in literary creation and social criticism, they were the two main pillars of the idealistic revival of France at the end of the last century.

### III

The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw the youth of France socially and politically uprooted, vainly striving towards a vague idealism, morally and aesthetically confused, and looking for a guide in a waste-land of intellectual frustration. The great ones of the nineteenth century were no more. Richard Wagner had died in 1883, and the very same year that Rolland left the *Normal School*, in 1889, Nietzsche's genius was engulfed by the final darkness of the mind

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(1) Quoted in Daniel Halévy : *Ch. Peguy et les Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, p. 80.



in which he spent the remaining ten years of his life. And neither Shakespeare nor Beethoven could give a final answer to the pressing problems of the time. Thus only Tolstoy remained. The Tolstoy of *Ivan Iltych*, with his insistence on the problem of death and human misery, and also the Tolstoy of *What is to be done* with his fierce indictment of art, his contemptuous treatment of Beethoven and Shakespeare as artists of fourth rank and wastrels, his rejection of all modern art as merely sensual and morally corrupting. All of a sudden the youth of Europe had to choose between the master-artists of the past and their idol of the present. For no compromise seemed possible. On the one side there was the joy to live, the dynamic vitality of a Shakespeare or a Beethoven, on the other, the fore-knowledge of death and the condemnation of the artistic impulse. And the young Romain Rolland took courage into both his hands and wrote a letter to Tolstoy. In this letter he expressed all the inhibited agony of his soul, his anguish, his uncertainty, his readiness to accept whatever Tolstoy might say. All he wanted was a final solution of the problems of his generation: "I am driven," he writes: "by an intense desire to know how to live, and from you alone can I expect a reply."<sup>1</sup> And remembering Tolstoy's pre-occupation with death, he continues, "I am tormented by this idea of death which I find on almost every page of your novels." How should one overcome this "idea", asks the young Frenchman. How can one get rid of that haunting morbidity, that fruitless anguish

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(1) This as well as the following quotations are taken from Paul Birukoff's article *Romain Rolland et Tolstoy*, published in the Birthday-Book to Romain Rolland's 60th birthday, p. 58sq. For the full letter and Tolstoy's reply see *Appendix*.

of death? Tolstoy himself had suggested manual labour as the surest means of "forgetting oneself," of finding back one's way to the soil from which alone creative labour springs. Rolland, however, wants to replace manual labour by artistic creation. "Why does manual labour become one of the essential conditions of true happiness," he asks Tolstoy. "Should one voluntarily deprive oneself of intellectual activity, the sciences and the arts, which seem to you to be incompatible with manual labour?"

Tolstoy was then absorbed in writing his book *On Life* and his correspondence remained neglected for a long time. But Rolland did not give in. After six months' silence he sent Tolstoy a reminder, imploring him to reply. And when Tolstoy received this second letter he was deeply moved. For this indeed was the cry of an agonising soul lost in the wilderness. "Tell me," says Rolland in this second letter, "I implore you, whether in all sincerity, since you have found truth, you are always *happy* to possess it? Reply please; I am in such a great need of advice! Around me, no moral guide...And reply in particular whether your good words are only for the Russian people, or for us all; for us Frenchmen, and for all who suffer and despair." And Tolstoy replied. He replied in a long letter which began with these moving words: "I have received your letter. It has touched me to the heart. I have read it with tears in my eyes..." And he goes on to develop his ideas about art and science and manual labour: "True science and true art have always existed and will always exist just as other forms of human activity, and it is impossible and useless either to doubt or to prove it. The false part which

the arts and the sciences play in our society, is due to the fact that the so-called civilized people, beginning with artists and scholars, constitute a privileged caste like the priests. And this caste has all the vices of all castes. It cultivates the vice of lowering the principle because of which it exists. Instead of a true religion, a false one. Instead of a true science, a false one. And the same for art. It has the fault of weighing heavily upon the masses and, over and above, of depriving them of what they pretend to propagate." This letter of Tolstoy became soon well-known all over Russia, and many publishers were eager to publish it. It actually was published in a Fortnightly, "Nedelia," in form of an article entitled "Manual labour and intellectual activity" with the sub-title "Letter to a Frenchman". It is also included in the complete works of Tolstoy.

In this letter Rolland also found for the first time a definition of the artist in terms of human conscience. This definition has a lasting influence on his own evolution. Here he found what he had been longing for all these years. The word was spoken that was to free him once and for all of purely aesthetic preoccupations and infuse into him a social consciousness which he was to express in all his later work. For does not Tolstoy also say in his letter: "A prophet is not one who has received the education of a prophet, but one who has the intimate conviction of what he is and of what he should be and of what he cannot be. This conviction is rare and cannot be proved but by the sacrifice which a man makes to his vocation." And has not Rolland also read these lines, underlined in the origi-

nal letter: "What unites men is the Good and the Beautiful, what divides them is the Evil and the Ugly..." And "I must follow the laws of my own reason and love others more than myself."

These extensive quotations from these letters were necessary as they will help us to trace Rolland's own evolution as an artist and a thinker. For everything in this correspondence points to the fact that Tolstoy's example was before Rolland in whatever he undertook in the following years. We shall find traces of it even twenty-five years later in his book on Mahatma Gandhi. For the time being, however, the correspondence did not end here. Ten years later, in 1897, Rolland writes to Tolstoy for the third time: "When I once asked for your advice, I was preoccupied by the antagonism which you seemed to establish between art and morality. Art was my life, my religion; I owed to it my purest and most innocent joys, and I derived from it my best strength to fight against evil. Could it be that it was opposed to the love for others, to self-sacrifice, I asked you; and you replied that you did not fight against art but against the artists of today, that you would not prohibit those who have music in their hearts from letting it sing, but that you did not want it to become a profession or a bargain." And Rolland affirms that art for him is not an object of economic profit and sends him the proof-sheets of his first drama *Saint Louis*. He concludes his letter with these memorable lines: "I dream of nothing more than to do a little good to men, and to draw them away from the nothingness that kills them... The worst of all the evils, is that nothing matters, that all effort is useless, this murderous thought of noth-

ingness which has destroyed so many lives, so many lives around me."

Although Tolstoy never replied to this letter, Rolland wrote to him again in 1901. In this letter he expresses his admiration for the work published by Tolstoy during the last three years, especially those books and articles dealing with the *Dushobortsi*, a group of men who burned their weapons, refused military service, and organised themselves into a primitive pacifist community. Due to illness this letter also remained without reply. The fifth and last letter was written in 1906. Rolland also sent him at the same time his book on Michel Angelo and told him that he will find many similarities, similar doubts and sufferings, in the life of Michel Angelo as in his own. Although a reply had been sent to this letter, no copy of it could be found in the Tolstoy-Archive and it has never been published. The comparison between Tolstoy and Michel Angelo, however, is significant as the lives of these two men provided Rolland during these years with sufficient subject-matter for two of his greatest biographies.

Romain Rolland has never told us how much, exactly, this correspondence, and especially Tolstoy's reply, meant to him. That the effect was lasting is shown in a curious passage in his *Jean Christophe*, written around 1909. In a conversation between Christophe and Françoise, she refers him to other artists. "Do you yourself understand other artists?" she asks, "... the people you love best are so far away from you! Look at your Tolstoy..." It seems that Christophe just as the young Rolland long ago, had written to him: "He had been filled with enthusiasm for him,

and had wept over his books: he wanted to set one of the peasant tales to music, and had asked for his authority, and had sent him his *Lieder*. Tolstoy did not reply, any more than Goethe replied to Schubert or Berlioz when they sent him their masterpieces. He had had Christophe's music played to him, and it had irritated him; he could make nothing of it. He regarded Beethoven as decadent, and Shakespeare as a charlatan. On the other hand, he was infatuated with various little pretty-pretty masters... 'Great men have no need of us,' said Christophe. 'We must think of others'."<sup>1</sup>

This is how truth and fiction mingle and become one in the imagination of the writer. Did Rolland unconsciously identify himself with Schubert or Berlioz, and Tolstoy with Goethe? Is this passage in *Jean Christophe*, the result of a wish-fulfilment or of a disappointed hope? Was he annoyed with Tolstoy for not having replied to three of his letters? Is it Christophe who speaks or Rolland himself? We shall never know. But one thing is certain: this correspondence, and especially Tolstoy's first reply, is a stepping stone in Rolland's life. It opened his eyes to the true function of an artist and of his own individual conscience. For the first time he also established one of those contacts with the thought of Europe for which he became so famous in his later years. That there was a good deal of disappointment with Tolstoy in store for him is undoubtedly true. We shall have occasion to refer to it in our discussion of Rolland's biography of Tolstoy and his book on Gandhi. But we would like to believe that from now on the doors of Europe

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(1) *Jean Christophe*, (*Journey's End*), III, p. 94.

were opened to him—his first hesitating step across the frontiers of France.

#### IV

One year after his first letter to Tolstoy, Rolland himself left France for Italy on a scholarship from the *Normal School*. Although he was supposed to do research in Rome, he was powerfully attracted by the Italian landscape and people, their art, architecture and their music. It is no accident either that it was in Italy that he formulated his first plans for his drama based on the Renaissance and on Shakespeare. But the deepest influence during his stay in Italy was again a human being, one of those cosmopolitan minds which, like Tolstoy, overshadow the everyday life of men. Tolstoy had already opened Rolland's mind to certain cultural and moral forces at work outside France. Here in Italy he found a true representative of this new European consciousness. It was an old German lady Malwida von Meysenbug, a highly cultured woman who counted among her intimate friends Wagner, Nietzsche, Mazzini, Herzen, and Kossuth.

It is strange, and not without significance that this young Frenchman in search of certainty, should always be attracted by people very much older than himself, people who can look back on a life of work and fulfilment, people, in short, for whom the past mattered more than the future. Preoccupied, as he was, with the past, with historical tradition, he quite naturally felt fascinated by those who still represented this tradition in all its purity. His contemporaries, Rolland knew, had broken with the past. Their boats were burned behind them and they were marching

towards a dark and menacing future. Only a rejuvenated tradition could save them, a conscious going back to the roots from which all creation springs. Shakespeare and Beethoven were deep down in the earth: they indeed were part of Europe's past, but they were no longer living forces from which to derive strength for the future. Tolstoy had given him an answer which only half satisfied him: Rolland's intellect was at that time much too restless to appreciate and accept fully the resignation and serenity of the ageing giant of Russia. What he wanted was the living Europe, the presence of those forces that had formed and given meaning to his generation. Tolstoy's opinions were too controversial and Bergson's probably was too young to guide such a restless mind.

It was this German woman, born when Goethe was still alive, the living incarnation of all that was best in the nineteenth century, who brought him in touch with the mind of Europe. In her life all the man-made frontiers had become meaningless and the lives of the writers she had known continued to shed their light on all those who came in contact with her. It was in those daily conversations with her that Rolland formed his first plan of his *Jean Christophe*, the novel of an artist beyond the artificial frontiers of Europe. But this friendship—which lasted until her death—also provides us with an opportunity of seeing Romain Rolland through the eyes of this ageing woman. For in a short autobiographical sketch, published twenty-five years before Rolland attained fame, she expressed her confident belief in his future greatness: "My friendship with this young man was a great pleasure to me in other respects besides music. For those



advanced in years, there can be no loftier gratification than to rediscover in the young the same impulse towards idealism, the same striving towards the highest aims, the same contempt for all that is vulgar or trivial, the same courage in the struggle for freedom of individuality. . . He aspired to the fullest possible development of his faculties, whilst I myself, in his stimulating presence, was able to revive youthfulness of thought, to rediscover an intense interest in the whole world of imaginative beauty. As far as poesy is concerned, I gradually became aware of the greatness of my young friend's endowments, to be finally convinced of the fact by the reading of one of his dramatic poems." And a few hours after listening in Rolland's company to the opera "Parsifal" by Wagner, she notes down: "But I knew that none the less he would work at the roaring loom of time, weaving the living garment of divinity. The tears with which his eyes were filled at the close of the opera made me feel once more that my faith in him would be justified. Thus I bade him farewell with heartfelt thanks for the time filled with poesy which his talents had bestowed upon me. I dismissed him with the blessing that age gives to youth entering upon life."<sup>1</sup>

And when Rolland returned to Paris, after a stay of two years in Italy, he indeed "entered upon life" with all the enthusiasm of youth. After writing several books on music of a purely academic interest, he was appointed professor of the history of music, first at the *Normal School*, and then, from 1903 onwards, at the *Sarbonne*. Actually his academic studies in music

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(1) Quoted from *Der Lebensabend einer Idealistin*, in Stefan Zweig: *Romain Rolland*, p. 27sq.

served an extremely useful purpose: they made him aware of the unity underlying all historical evolution, the unity of the spirit of creation regardless of the difference of time and space. What he had learned from Malwida von Meysenbug, he now applied to his studies and research: no event in the history of mankind can be separated from its context. Just as a political incident is cause and effect all in one, an infinite number of political facts chained together,—so also a thought is only part and parcel of a larger unity of innumerable thoughts, and an experience repeats itself in the past, the present, and future, like a mirror consisting of an infinite number of small glasses in which everything is reflected in the same way an infinite number of times.

This discovery was not new. Many before him must have come, and did come, to similar conclusions about the ultimate unity of the spirit. But for Rolland—after his correspondence with Tolstoy, his friendship with Malwida von Meysenbug, and his research on the history of music,—it had become a living reality, the most powerful experience of his youth, one that will determine all his future preoccupations with the various expressions of the human mind either in Europe or in the East.

He has found his way.

## V

The growth of conscience cannot be measured in terms of abstract concepts and values. A conscience to attain full maturity, must be tested in action. There exists a continuous tension in the social life of man which leads to action. To be part of this tension is to

grow with the social body—is to act for or against the principles for which this particular society stands. All social action implies sacrifice of self. Only one who has something to sacrifice can become part of constructive social activity. The thinker or the introspective dreamer will keep aloof. They will cultivate a detached attitude and will look down upon those who act with contempt, but sometimes also with envy. They will be haunted by a secret fear of the masses and will identify them with the principle of chaos and destruction. Absorbed in the complicated workings of their own conscience they will look upon historical events of a political or social nature as irrelevant trivialities or, at best, as a passing unpleasantness.

Romain Rolland's first "test of conscience" came at the end of the last century when all of a sudden France was rent in twain by the Dreyfus affair. It is difficult for us today to visualise what this "affair" meant to contemporary Frenchmen. We are used to these eternal French "affairs" which indeed are often trivial and commonplace enough, a financial scandal, an elopement, a political murder. The excitement only lasts a few weeks or months and usually ends with a vote of no-confidence against the Government. It provides exhilarating subject-matter for the daily-press and for heated debates in drawing-rooms and a good deal of physical violence in the chamber of deputies. It is a pleasant interlude in the otherwise monotonous existence of small provincial towns. Sometimes it also gives rise to a new play and a number of popular songs—soon forgotten.

Usually nobody is arrested, only a suicide or two, and the new Cabinet hushes the matter up. If any deputies are involved, they have to pay a handsome price to the press, for some amount of black-mailing is unavoidable. The man-in-the-street understands little or nothing of what has happened—only the stock-exchange shows some peculiar fluctuation. And soon his attention is diverted again to a new sensation, the collapse of a metropolitan insurance company, a railway accident, the opening of a new casino by a Minister on the Riviera. And in between the various scandals, affairs, and sensations, the man-in-the-street will cultivate his vegetable-garden, drink his daily aperitif, and curse the government.

But the Dreyfus affair was more than a sensation or a publicity-stunt. It concerned the very existence of France as a civilized nation. For a man, a French officer, had been condemned to forced labour for life, by a clique of unscrupulous army men, priests, and aristocrats. He had been condemned for a crime he had never committed. To accuse a French officer of espionage in the service of a foreign power, the hereditary enemy of France, was not a thing to be trifled with. And passions were quickly roused and parties formed and a civil war was in the offing.

Dreyfus was a Jew—an aggravating circumstance. A thoroughly honest man and the victim of political intrigues. The question of justice was in everybody's mind; never before did Frenchmen use that word so often, and never before did it cover so many vices. But Dreyfus was innocent. Every Frenchman was faced by a problem of conscience. They had to choose between what was considered good for

their country and their sense of justice. The progressive forces were on the side of Dreyfus and they carried on an unceasing propaganda against the reactionary elements in the country. Zola and Anatole France played a leading part in this attempt to restore justice, even if it went against the interests of the country. Zola appeared before the tribunal and delivered one of his most impressive speeches. The reaction, however, was stronger. And although Dreyfus was released, the whole "affair" petered out in disgust and frustration.

Rolland knew that Dreyfus was innocent. But he was not yet ripe for social action which would involve his whole self and a sacrifice of much that was dear to him. The problem of human justice was there, but on an abstract level and to be solved in terms of abstractions. The moment he realised that the "masses" were involved, that political parties took up the cause of the accused, he withdrew into his private world of ultimate conceptions and deliberately shut his ears to the noise from outside. This young man whose innermost being was longing for harmony, took fright at the discord of the multitudes. Instead of testing his conscience in the actual battle as Zola and Anatole France had done, he wrote a play, a dramatic parable, in which he attempted to lift the conflict from the realm of "trivialities" to the realm of eternity. And he published the play under the pseudonym Saint-Just.

Was he afraid to commit himself? The first time that action called him on to the stage of life, he failed. And yet, as we shall see in our discussion of his dramas, the problem of action was always before

him. It had already then become the main problem of his life. Only after 1914 will he find a solution. And he will range himself besides those who fearlessly fulfil their destiny, against all odds, against even their own country. But much suffering was still in store for him, before he could sacrifice himself and his own vocation for what Tolstoy had called the Beautiful and the Good, in his fight against the Evil and the Ugly.

The corruption of literature is, in comparison with the moral and political corruption of a country, a very slight matter indeed. To Rolland and his friends, at that time, it was of greater importance than the Dreyfus affair. And together with his friends from different campaign, that of purifying literature, of the *Normal School*, Rolland started an altogether different campaign, that of purifying literature, of infusing new blood into it, at a time when it indeed seemed as though the "trivialities" of the naturalistic novel would suppress, once and for all, all genuine literary creation. And with their unflinching idealism they started a fortnightly review, the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, which for fifteen years remained the mouthpiece of the intellectual elite of France. In it were published, apart from the works of his friends, Rolland's plays, his biographies of Beethoven, Michel Angelo, and Tolstoy, and the whole of *Jean Christophe*.

This was indeed an extraordinary venture. No money was spent on advertising it and only rarely could it be found with the usual agents. It was read by students and a small number of men of letters. Its circulation was necessarily limited. No honora-

rium was paid to its contributors. This was actually the main feature of the magazine. To compromise literature with profit-making seemed to them a sin against their vocation. And although we might accuse them today of too much self-consciousness, we also admire their attempt to live up to a principle which Tolstoy had been the first to indicate. By denying themselves economic prosperity, they contributed to the good of the community. Tolstoy's word had become life again.

Romain Rolland himself, in an autobiographical article—*Good-bye to the Past*—recalls those eager times of idealist action with unmistakable emotion: "A handful of young men (I was one of them, with Peguy) stood up, about 1900, against this compromise. An intoxication of purity and stoic truth burned with its white fire in select group, touched by the seal of Beethoven and *Resurrection* (published at about that time). The *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* valiantly sounded the assault on the crimes of civilization and the lies which filled politics. Before taking time to reconcile or make a considered choice between the two great ideas of Fatherland and Humanity in which we were absorbed we wished to avenge their sacrilege, to chase the money-changers out of the temple and purify the worship of the two Mother Gods, who were to me as sisters. Jean Christophe and Peguy fanned, with full cheeks, the mysticism of action, the heroic religion of a life that surrenders itself, sacrifices itself to its faith, whatever the faith may be."<sup>1</sup>

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(1) Romain Rolland : *I Will Not Rest*, p. 246.

These are great words. The words of an ageing man who looks back upon his youth with sympathy and admiration. The fight has not been in vain. Conscience has taken root in a fertile soil. From now on books will pour forth in a never-ending stream. The first frustration and cynicism of youth have been overcome. And now the soul will begin her great song of the mysticism of action, now the curtain will raise over a stage that has been purified, now the great sacrifice to faith will begin.

And we remember Tolstoy's words in his "Letter to a Frenchman," words that come from far away across the passing of time, words half forgotten already, spoken in the darkness to one who listens and is eager to understand. Now these words will bear fruit. Rolland, from being an apprentice, has become a master. And around him spreads the silence that surrounds all creators. We can see him standing on the darkening stage all by himself. And we can hear his voice, vibrating with intense emotion and a slight touch of self-consciousness perhaps, speaking to an audience that is not there. Only from time to time someone enters on tiptoe, as though it were a church, and takes a seat in one of the back-rows, and listens to that youthful voice. But the stage and the theatre remain empty and with the falling darkness the echo throws back the voice to the speaker. He shivers, and his voice fails him.





## II

# THE STAGE

THE theatre has been for centuries past the pillar of French literary tradition. On the stage could be found, from the classical age onwards, all that was great and unique in French civilization, its heroism, its sense of form, its subtle psychological insight. The seventeenth century had given France her most representative form of expression, a highly stylized drama, the abstract reasoning of the human soul, a declamatory and rhetorical language. It was a theatre written by courtiers for the aristocracy. And a tradition that once was a life-giving force had become a convention. Neither the "domestic drama" nor the romantic drama had succeeded in replacing it. The middle-classes at the end of the nineteenth century had lost all touch with the world of the theatre. What they saw on the stage were figures representing abstract virtues or vices, the unconvincing conflict between love and duty, the artificial gestures and declamation of an aristocracy which had been long ago swept away by the storm of the French revolution. Or, if they went to a modern play, they were confronted by intriguing psychological situations, the subtle reasoning of debauchery, or, at best, a frankly sexual interpretation of life. Not that the middle-classes minded it much. They accepted everything that was offered to them without grumbling, admiring both the genuine aristocratic way of life of the past and the false aristocracy of the pre-

sent. Indeed, they knew no better way of dramatic entertainment. And though the music-halls were crowded, the theatres remained empty.

It will be well to remember what Romain Rolland has to say about the contemporary theatre in *Jean Christophe*. When Christophe, in *The Market Place*, is for the first time confronted by the French theatre, he is struck by its commercial aspect more than by anything else. The theatre was no longer an art. It had—as the rest of literature—become a money-making proposition. All one had to do was to exploit the instincts of the masses in such a way as to attract the greatest number of spectators. Those who were at that time in control of the theatres in Paris “were extraordinarily skilful at beating up filth and sentiment, and giving virtue a flavouring of vice, vice a flavouring of virtue, and turning upside down every human relation of age, sex, the family and the affections.”<sup>1</sup> Everything was allowed on the stage. Even the works of the great ones were lowered on to the level of the pleasure-seeking crowd: “And what a sorry figure did the phantoms of the great men cut on the board: the heroic anarchy of Ibsen, the Gospel of Tolstoy, the Superman of Nietzsche.”<sup>2</sup> The atmosphere pervading these plays was always the same: it was the final decline of a civilization which had ceased to create greatness either in art or in life: “The more closely he examined that sort of art, the more acutely he became aware of the odour that from the very first he had detected, faintly in the beginning,

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(1) *Jean Christophe*, (*The Market Place*), II, p. 71.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 80.

then more strongly, and finally it was suffocating: the odour of death."<sup>1</sup>

Only an artist conscious of this decline, this "odour" of death, could leave the beaten track. And again two of the idols of his youth, showed Rolland the way. Tolstoy who had condemned all art that is no longer in touch with the people, and Shakespeare who by his own creation had established a dramatic tradition which was beyond all the limitations of time and space. The former led Rolland to expound his own theory on the function of the theatre in modern times; the latter to experiment with new forms of the dramas. He failed both in theory and practice; not because he was not sincere enough either in his writings on the dramas or in his plays, but rather because he was too sincere and because the public was not yet ripe for a new artistic venture of this kind, and the forces against which he had to struggle, had all the economic power in their hand to hush up anything that went against their interests. The "people" for whom the plays were written did not turn up in the theatres and the critics conveniently kept silent. It is true, shortly after the war, some of his plays had a sensational success, especially in Germany, but, considered as part of Rolland's evolution as a writer, they were failures, and he was the first to acknowledge his defeat. As a stepping stone in the history of his conscience, however, they must find a place in this book.

Let us first look at his theories on the drama. They were published in form of articles, between 1900 and 1903 (some of his plays had already been written at

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(1) *Ibid.*, p. 81.

that time) in the *Revue d'Art Dramatique*, and published in England (in 1919) under the title *The People's Theatre*. That Tolstoy was still the deciding influence in his life, is implied by the title of the book. The drama, to be a living art, must be of and for the people. It, therefore, must be a source of constant energy; for "the happiness of simple and healthy men is never complete without some sort of action. Let the theatre be an arena of action."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, action alone is not enough; order must be brought back "into the chaos of the soul," otherwise action will be aimless or destructive. Indeed, Rolland implies that the people will have to learn from the theatre how to act and how to think. The drama will be both an entertainment and a school. A school, not so much of academic learning and scholarship, as of feeling. The moral lessons should be simple and understandable to all. The plot should be based on the struggle of man with the elemental forces around him. It should represent not only the individual but the nation as well—and above the nation, humanity in general. "The People's Theatre shall be open to everyone who is of or for the people. Let us construct in Paris an epic for all Europe."<sup>2</sup>

Such theories, however acceptable they may seem to us today, required both new playwrights and new subject-matter. Who indeed are the playwrights, asks Rolland, who could be expected to live up to such a conception of a people's theatre, who would treat of the fundamental problems of life in a "simple" and to every one in an intelligible manner? Does that not mean

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(1) *The People's Theatre*, p. 105.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 129.

the lowering of the artistic level to the intellectual standards of an uncultured populace? Rolland was intensely conscious of this contradiction inherent in his very conception of a people's theatre. What useful purpose did all his theories serve if there were none to put them into practice? And he turns towards the past and rejects almost everything as unsuitable. He even rejects the truly great ones, his own idols. As regards Shakespeare, for instance, the people "understand what is instinctive and violent in it; but still how immeasurably far from his myriad-minded genius do they still remain! It is a pitiful thing to have to bring the works of a great man down to the level of the masses!"<sup>1</sup> And Wagner, the greatest dramatic and musical genius of the nineteenth century, fares no better. "What profit can the people derive from the abnormal sentimental complications of Wagner, the excessive eroticism, the metaphysics of Valhalla, Tristram's death-scented love, the mystico-carnal torments of the Knight of the Holy Grail? It all flows from sources tainted with neo-Christian or neo-Buddhist refinement, translated into decidedly mortal and physical action, and all set into a gorgeous framework, though the basis be rotten."<sup>2</sup>

Is it Tolstoy who speaks or Rolland? If Wagner is not good enough for the people, and if Shakespeare is "too good," does that mean that there should be two kinds of drama—one, simple and elemental, for the people, and the other, sophisticated and refined, for the intellectual elite alone? Rolland, unknowingly, touches here upon one of the main problems of his

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(1) *The People's Theatre*, p. 40.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 42/44.

life: the problem of an elite, the forerunners, those who suffer for the multitude, who are crucified, and thereby show them the way. For the first time we feel in this book that Rolland has become aware of the necessity of affirming an ideal which will hold good for the elite alone. By laying down rules as to what a people's theatre should be, he also draws a dividing line between the culture of the masses and that of the chosen few. For never will the masses understand the prophetic ideal of those whom Rolland will later call the forerunners. And Rolland took it upon himself to create anew some of those characters whose struggles and sufferings heralded a new dawn.

## II

In his early plays the influence of Shakespeare and the Italian Renaissance is stronger than that of Tolstoy. Between 1890 and 1893 he wrote five plays, all of them dealing with Greek or Roman antiquity. These plays were, however, never published. Rolland's enthusiasm for Shakespeare never wavered during these years, and although we know little of these earliest dramatic attempts, we can safely assume that they were written in the spirit of Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup> An autobiographical reference to Shakespeare can also be found in *Jean Christophe*: "Christophe had never missed an opportunity of seeing a play of Shakespeare. Shakespeare was to him of the same order as Beethoven, an inexhaustible spring of life."<sup>2</sup>

Soon, however, Rolland turned towards the history of France and looked there for those ideals which

(1) See also Romain Rolland's various articles on Shakespeare, some of which were published in "*Demain*", April 1916, and later in English translation in the *Modern Review*, Calcutta, Nov. 1925, p. 495, etc.

(2) *Jean Christophe*, (Revolt), I, p. 434.

would inspire the masses. *Saint Louis* was written soon after his return from Italy, in 1903. It is also the first of his plays in the dramatic cycle *Tragedies of Faith*. What indeed he was working on was to depict in the form of drama those mysterious streams of faith which at a particular moment spread through an entire nation, an "idea" that all of a sudden becomes the common property of all. It is with the essence of such a movement that Rolland is here concerned, not with its ultimate goal. For any idea can carry people to self-sacrifice. Worldly greatness is immaterial. The greatness within is all that matters. True heroism is one that leads to self-sacrifice in victory—and in defeat. The character of Saint Louis (Louis IX) is remarkable in as much as Rolland evidently considers him to be one of those "forerunners" whose life is the very expression of the eternal stream of faith in man. This is how Stefan Zweig, the famous biographer of Rolland, summarises this character: "His leading quality is gentleness, but he has so much of it that the strong grow weak before him, he has nothing but his faith, but this faith builds mountains of action. He neither can nor will lead his people to victory; but he makes his subjects transcend themselves, transcend their own inertia and the apparently futile venture of the crusade, to attain faith. Thereby he gives the whole nation faith which springs from self-sacrifice."<sup>1</sup>

Rolland has left the beaten track. He has left the abstract conflicts between Love and Duty, Justice and Fatherland, the subtle psychological complications of the modern stage, and has chosen instead the most

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(1) Stefan Zweig : *Romain Rolland*, p. 81.

unpopular of all themes: defeat. His contemporaries could not possibly understand that he was concerned with faith born out of suffering, with action created out of defeat. Another play in the same dramatic cycle, *Aërt*, written in 1895, opens on a scene "cast in an imaginary Holland of the seventeenth century. We see a people broken by defeat and, which is much worse, debased thereby. The future presents itself as a period of slow decadence, whose anticipation definitely annuls the already exhausted energies.... The moral and political humiliations of recent years are the foundation of the troubles still to come."<sup>1</sup>

Action which springs from defeat is a problem particularly dear to Rolland. He has found it in all the lives of the great men of the past, he experienced it himself in his own life, he wrote about it in innumerable essays and articles. Perhaps the best definition can be found again in *Jean Christophe*. Not every defeat will result in action; only the great ones, the forerunners, will transform defeat into a stream of faith. The rest will break to pieces: "Defeat new-forges the chosen among men: it sorts out the people: it winnows out those who are purest and strongest, and makes them purer and stronger. But it hastens the downfall of the rest or cuts short their flight. In that way it separates the men of the people, who slumber or fall by the way, from the chosen few who go marching on. The chosen few know it and suffer: even in the most valiant there is a secret melancholy, a feeling of their own impotence and isolation."<sup>2</sup> The problem of defeat is also that of the forerunners. One

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(1) Quoted in Stefan Zweig, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

(2) *Jean Christophe*, (*The House*), II, p. 868.



cannot separate the one from the other. For those who are in advance of their time have to accept suffering and defeat. But after every defeat they are reborn again and the same old stream of faith carries them along towards a new and far-away goal.

### III

If the problem of faith was in the foreground of his first dramatic cycle, it is even more so in his *Theatre of the Revolution*, a gigantic attempt to dramatise the whole history of the French revolution. Again it is the "stream of faith" that inspires him, again he will show to the people the forerunners, the prophets of a future and better world. The first of the plays *Les Loups* (The Wolves, 1898) has already been mentioned in connection with the Dreyfus affairs. It is an allegorical drama depicting the conflict between the principle of justice and the love for one's fatherland. Rolland, in this play, has grasped and extracted the moral essence of the Dreyfus affair. We today may have our doubts as regards the abstract treatment of this theme. But Rolland was no born dramatist. Everyone of his drama has a "thesis," and the characters live according to the dictates of a super-human moral conscience. They live in eternity, not in the flux of time. They are devoid of the idiosyncrasies for which we love Shakespeare's heroes. They seem to be at times so conscious of their "thesis," their over-sensitive conscience, that all they can do is to give expression to purely abstract concepts.

The best instance for a "drama of defeat" is *The Triumph of Reason* (1899). Here we find for the first time a complete exposition of the dialectics of defeat, the transformation of worldly defeat into spiritual

victory. The characters in this play proudly declare: "We have saved our faith from a victory which would have disgraced us, from one wherein the conqueror is the first victim. In our unsullied defeat, that faith looms more richly and gloriously than before." Or, "All victory is evil, whereas all defeat is good in so far as it is the outcome of free choice." To have "outstripped victory" is the aim of this elite. How can "the people" understand the moral essence of defeat?

Two more plays remain, *Danton* (1900) in which the collision between Danton and Robespierre provides Rolland with a dramatic conflict between freedom and law, and *The Fourteenth of July* (1902) where the revolution is depicted as an elemental force of nature. This drama therefore has no heroes, the multitude itself is the only hero of the play. In the Preface to the play we read: "Individuals are merged in the ocean of the people. He who limns a storm at sea, need not paint the details of every wave; he must show the unchained forces of the ocean. Meticulous precision is a minor matter compared with the impassioned truth of the whole." The heroism of the revolution is in both the plays, a burning faith in the "mysticism of action" springing from self-sacrifice. Once more, in 1902, Rolland again attempted a drama, *A Day Will Come*, inspired by the Boer War and his admiration for the vanquished. Rolland was not out to attack any particular nation; he was rather concerned with the spirit of modern civilization which he condemns. It is the first of his attempts on the stage to look beyond the frontiers of France for a dramatic conflict involving, as usual, universal moral principles.

Three ideas can be discerned in all these plays alike: Rolland's conception of an elite, the forerunners of humanity, misunderstood by the masses, forever suffering for the sake of the future; his transformation of defeat into moral victory; his belief in a mysticism of action. In these three concepts we find Rolland's first attempt to give a definite shape to his conscience. The subject-matter of his plays proves that this conscience is still divided in a supreme conflict between personal self-realization and the welfare of the community. By emphasising the elite which is carried on the crest of the stream of faith, he rejects the claims of the masses to political and moral leadership. Only in defeat all are equal. There alone the distinction between leaders and followers is abolished. They all find their way back to humility.

But the theatre remains empty. Romain Rolland, himself a forerunner, has no audience. His figures which symbolise abstract conflicts move restlessly across the stage, declaiming universal truths which nobody wants to hear. And only when, ultimately, silence falls over the stage, the mortal lives of his heroes and prophets will be transformed into the living ideals of a rising generation.

## IN SEARCH OF GREATNESS

ROLLAND'S attitude towards the masses is ambivalent from the very beginning : he is afraid of their potential power for destruction, their indiscriminate acceptance of ideas and values from outside, their disregard of ultimate moral principles. On the other hand, Rolland realizes their almost mystical faith in leadership and their latent desire to improve the world. The masses, therefore, represent to him in this period both the good and the evil principle of life. Everything depends on the kind of leader who will show the way. Already in the "forerunners" of his dramas we discern Rolland's preoccupation with spiritual leadership. In the period that follows, he will devote himself entirely to a study of the lives of the great prophets of modern Europe.

The dramatic form no longer satisfied him. Perhaps he had become aware of a new dimension in the struggle for ultimate freedom of those who lead and are crucified. The external circumstances no longer matter and the historical environment of his plays recedes into the background. All that remains is the spirit of man. The conflicts of a genius take place according to him, on an essentially spiritual or mental level, the fight of the limited Ego for complete self-expression, the antagonism between the artist's aspiration and the medium through which alone he can express himself, his eternal desire to give permanence to the fleeting moment of the present, and to

give the one and only shape to his personal experiences. The artist's sensibility, intensely aware of the flux of time, yet wants to immortalise the very moment of its existence. In great works of art time stands still. The past has been integrated. The present is no more. Only the future beckons from afar.

That is also why every great artist is also a prophet, a forerunner, and that is why his contemporaries crucify him. For there is no greater sin in the eyes of the people than to be in advance of one's time. For when the present ceases to exist, the conventions and standards according to which life had been regulated, also come to an end. In every great work of art values and beliefs fall to pieces, and a new conception of life has its beginning. With every great master-artist a new age becomes conscious of its existence. They herald the freshness and transparence of dawn. The warm sunlight of the day is not for them. They are born when it is still dark. They die with the fading of stars. The rising of the sun is their fulfilment.

Romain Rolland was one of the first to develop the writing of biographies into a form of art. Biographies which tell nothing but the objective truth are liable to be mere books of reference from which the reader, at best, may gather some knowledge. What Rolland attempts in all his biographies is a combination of truth and fiction, of objective analysis and the biographer's own personal imagination. Indeed at times the identification between the biographer and the object of the biography is so complete, that it is difficult to know whether Rolland is not writing his own biography rather than that of Beethoven, Michel

Angelo, or Tolstoy. Only his frame of reference changes. The spiritual reality remains the same. And when this identification between subject and object has been accomplished, then indeed we can see Roland's own sensibility behind the "Moses" of Michel Angelo, Beethoven's *Eroica*, or Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. Even the change of the medium of expression is a secondary matter. It is the same struggle for perfection, the same conflict between the Ego and the Universe, the same super-human suffering, whether expressed in sounds, in stone or colour, or in words. The solemnity in Michel Angelo's "Moses" is also in Beethoven's *Eroica*, and the resurrection of the soul finds a place as much in Tolstoy's novels as in the paintings of the former and the music of the latter. And all of them alike spoke of and for the future. Their agony was the agony of their age, unbearably intensified and concentrated in one man. Their dreams of the future were lost in the spiritual wilderness of the present. And the joy which we today gather from their works, their almost superhuman will to live and to fulfil themselves in creation, is indeed deceptive: for we forget only too easily that the joy and the will to live which they infused into their work could only increase in proportion to the intensity of their suffering: "The further we penetrate into the existence of great creators, the more strongly are we impressed by the magnitude of the unhappiness by which their lives were enveloped.... I mean that their genius, placing them in advance of their contemporaries by twenty, thirty, fifty, nay often a hundred years, and thus making of them wanderers in the

desert, condemned them to the most desperate exertions if they were but to live, to say nothing of winning to victory."<sup>1</sup>

And Rolland climbs those mountain-peaks of human greatness where the air is still fresh and nothing disturbs the silence of creation. The "people" are left down below in the plains. He can only see dim and vague shapes obscured at times by the rising mist and the dust of their trivial daily life. Here everything is clear and transparent, and in the great solitude around him he sees his masters at work. Only at times the clouds come and his vision is blurred. It is then that he listens to the clamour from below, gigantic armies on the march, for ever moving from defeat to victory, from victory to defeat. And when the cloud-banks lift, he can see the great ones smiling at the din and bustle of the multitudes. There is serenity in their smile, and the wisdom of things to come.

## II

Beethoven had never been forgotten. He had accompanied Rolland on his travels, on his various experiments with life. Beethoven's bust was before him when he had written to Tolstoy; Beethoven's spirit hovered over his conversations with Malwida von Meysenbug, and over his lectures on the history of music. We may even discern Beethoven's "heroism of the soul" in some of Rolland's plays. Indeed to the very last years of his life, Beethoven remained at his side, his most faithful companion in joy and sorrow. Again and again Rolland wrote articles or

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(1) Romain Rolland, quoted in Stefan Zweig, *op. cit.*, p. 134/5.

books on this greatest of all his heroes. And every book, every article, is a step higher towards the summit of the peak.

And yet, it needed courage to write that first book on Beethoven in 1903. Beethoven had ceased to be the "fashion" of the day; there were Wagner and Liszt and Debussy—the great decadents of the nineteenth century, with their denial of the classical form, their melodramatic effects, their hybrid emotions. It needed courage to write about Beethoven and his almost abstract simplicity of form and contents. It also needed a sense of musical tradition and a desire to revolt against the complacency and self-satisfaction of a decaying civilization. And Rolland begins his book with a protest: "The air is fetid. Old Europe is suffocating in a sultry and unclean atmosphere. Our thoughts are weighed down by a petty materialism.... The world sickens in a cunning and cowardly egoism. We are stifling. Throw the windows wide; let in the free air of heaven. We must breathe the souls of the heroes."

But Rolland's book on Beethoven is more than a protest. It is also a re-statement of values. We do not know whether Nietzsche ever exerted a strong influence on Romain Rolland. But when reading through his various books on Beethoven, we are reminded again and again of Nietzsche's conception of a superman, of him who perishes because he wanted more from life than the mediocrity of self-satisfaction. Just as Nietzsche conceived of a struggle between the Ego and his fate, so also does Rolland see in the lives of his heroes the very incarnation of this superhuman conflict: "Had destiny descended only



upon some weakling, or on an imitation great man, and bent his back under this burden, there would have been no tragedy in it, only an everyday affair. But here destiny meets one of its own stature, who 'seizes it by the throat', who is at savage grips with it all the night till the dawn—the last dawn of all—and who, dead at last, lies with his two shoulders touching the earth, but in his death he is carried victorious on his shield; one who out of his wretchedness has created a richness, out of his infirmity the magic wand that opens the rock."<sup>1</sup>

No, Beethoven's life was no "everyday affair". The intensity of his struggle by far surpasses that of the average man. Rolland's conception of creation as a continuous struggle between contradictory forces is indeed in opposition to everything the French have thought or said in the past about the creative process. This emphasis on the dualism in the creator's soul, his passionate striving for self-expression and the necessity he finds himself in to subdue the form to his will, leaves no place for the conception of a "divine inspiration". We today see only the result: we are no longer aware of the intense effort involved in the creative process. For it begins like a groping in the dark, a gradual awakening of the spirit, the great solitude of feverish and exhausting labour. We do not see the innumerable sketches that were needed to give the only perfect shape to an experience. For only when the medium of art has been subdued to the will of the creator, has the raw material of life been transformed into a work of art. Only when reason gains the upper hand, has life been fulfilled. It is

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(1) Romain Rolland : *Beethoven the Creator*, pp. 24-5.

in such a way that the creator marches from fulfilment to fulfilment, and more often than not this fulfilment means death: and after every death the artist is reborn again, stronger than ever and ready for a new sacrifice: "He is the masculine sculptor who dominates his matter and bends it to his hand; the master-builder, with Nature for his yard. For anyone who can survey these campaigns of the soul from which stand out the victories of the *Eroica* and the *Appassionata*, the most striking thing is not the vastness of the armies, the floods of tone, the masses flung into the assault, but the spirit in command, the imperial reason."<sup>1</sup>

Some critics have said that Rolland had read more into Beethoven's life than could actually be found there. They objected to the emotional flights of Rolland's imagination, his desire to reconstruct the "soul" of his hero rather than the environment in which he worked. Instead of sobriety and clear and rational thinking, they were confronted by the wild outbursts of a fanciful passion; instead of facts and data, they found a soul. Indeed Rolland never lost sight of his thesis: creation implies suffering for the creator; it is we, who come afterwards, who reap the joy. At the very beginning of his book on Beethoven, Rolland puts this thesis before his reader; everything that follows will only give strength and final proof to the points raised at the beginning: "...many have extolled his greatness as an artist, but he is far more than the first of all musicians. He is the heroic energy of modern art, the greatest and best friend of all who suffer and struggle. When we mourn over

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(1) *Ibid.*, pp. 27-5.

the sorrows of the world, he comes to our solace. It is as if he, seated himself at the piano in the room of a bereaved mother, comforting her with the wordless song of resignation. When we are wearied by the unending and fruitless struggle against mediocrity in vice and in virtue, what an unspeakable delight is it to plunge once more into this ocean of will and faith. He radiates the contagion of courage, the joy of combat, the intoxication of spirit which God himself feels. What victory is comparable to this? What conquests of Napoleon's? What sun of Austerlitz can compare in refulgence with this super-human effort, this triumph of the spirit, achieved by a poor and unhappy man, by a lonely invalid, by one who, though he was sorrow incarnate, though life denied him joy, was able to create joy that he might bestow it on the world....The device of every heroic soul must be: out of suffering cometh joy."

. The suffering, the sorrow, and unhappiness in the artist's life correspond to the "defeat" of the great leaders of people. When Saint Louis, in Rolland's drama, led his people to defeat, he thereby gave them the victory of the spirit over matter; Beethoven's "leadership" was unconscious, his "defeat" concerned only himself, his own soul. But as the defeat of a political leader, according to Rolland, embraces the whole people and leads them towards a purer awakening in future, so also the intensely personal defeat of a master-artist reflects his age. What has consciously been performed by Rolland's historical heroes on the stage, becomes unconscious striving in Beethoven's life. But even Beethoven's personal defeat and victory is historically determined. It is the old struggle,

of the European genius for perfection, reborn again at the beginning of the nineteenth century,—Beethoven, the “leader” of the European mind, the unconscious symbol of his age: “Each great epoch of humanity has its own, its Son of God, its human archetype, whose glance, whose gestures, whose every Word, are the common possession of millions of the living. The being of a Beethoven—his sensibility, his conception of the world, the form of his intelligence and of his will, the laws of his construction, his ideology, as well as the substance of his body and his temperament—everything is representative of a certain European epoch. Not that epoch modelled itself on him! If we resemble him, it is because he and we are made of the same flesh. He is not the shepherd driving his flock before him; he is the bull marching at the head of his herd!”<sup>1</sup>

What we today call the “classical” period in European music, was indeed the result of a gigantic effort to overcome the flux of time, to immortalise the fleeting moment of the present for eternity to come. Rolland calls the people the “herd”. That is significant. For they, in their utter unconsciousness and unawareness, only supplied the fertile soil on which the creative process has its being. Their existence was necessary to provide Beethoven with the raw material of art; only the clash between his genius and the trivialities of the herd could bring about that tension which led to creative effort. The relation between the genius and the people is always one and the same: as in a love-relationship the tension between two human beings leads to a deepening of the affections, so also

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(1) Romain Rolland : *Beethoven the Creator*, p. 21.

the constant discrepancy between the genius's sensibility and the people's complacency leads to a deepening of the artist's awareness. And by expressing himself, he also—though unknowingly—expresses his age: "Beethoven has succeeded in constructing in music the imperishable monument of an epoch of humanity, the type of classic art in which is fixed for ever the harmony of one of the great hours of the spirit, the perfect equilibrium of the inner forces, the full consonance of the thought with the matter employed and subdued."<sup>1</sup>

Rolland looks down from the first peak he has climbed. Below he sees the "herd", and from far away other peaks beckon, other imperishable monuments of "an epoch of humanity", other "great hours of the spirit." And by a peculiar *tour de force* he lifts himself up above all the peaks and surveys the mountains around him. He is struck by the similarities in shape, in colour, in form. Even the plains far below appear all alike, with the same herd docilely following the master, and crucifying him at the journey's end. But Rolland's attitude towards the masses is as ambivalent as before. And without looking too closely at what happens below, and deliberately shutting his ears to the cries of misery, starvation, and helplessness from the plains, he again lands on another peak, where the air is as fresh and transparent as before. Only the landscape has changed. Instead of the court at Vienna, the baroque architecture of far-flung palaces, and Napoleon's armies marching from land to land, we are in the feudal Italy of the Renaissance, its princes and popes, the incense and candles

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(1) Romain Rolland : *Beethoven the Creator*, p. 199.

of the Vatican, its politics of cunning and the poison, and again armies on the march, besieging cities and spreading terror in the countryside. The language and the gestures, everything has changed, only the ultimate reality remains the same: the reality of sorrow and joy, the reality of faith in action, the reality of prophetic defeat.

### III

How short is this step back from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth. The same impetus carries Rolland across time, the same easy flow of words—all too easy, it seems at times—the same exclamations and outbursts of unrestrained emotions. Indeed one of the characteristics which all these early biographies have in common is their intensity of passion. The biographer at times seems to lose control over his subject. And the reader is wildly asking himself whether it is his own biography that Rolland writes or that of his heroes. Thus it happens that many a reader is more interested—when reading these biographies—in the personality of the biographer than in the subject of his book. And this personality is intensely fascinating. Pages of incoherent and passionate outbursts are followed by close analytical studies of the works of his masters. The almost blinding light of a highly developed critical intelligence is followed by the semi-darkness of allusive and suggestive statements. References to the age are thrown in between in a haphazard manner and it seems as though the biographer is hardly aware of the existence of the colourful and for ever changing life around the genius. Personal references to

the biographer's own life are absent; and yet we can see them in between the lines. He reflects himself in the lives of past masters, there is his joy and his suffering, his solitude and frustration, his attempts to subdue the raw material of life to his will.

No wonder, therefore, that many a reader misconstrued the purpose of his books. They were used to purely factual biographies, to the sobriety and objectivity of official academic research. They were bewildered by the impetus that carried them along, by Rolland's continuous attempts to analyse psychological states rather than the objective value of a life well lived or of a work of art well executed. Many years later, in one of his books on Beethoven, Rolland gives his own interpretation of his biography of Michel Angelo: "In this connection perhaps the author of a *Life of Michel Angelo* may be allowed to define the true purpose of a book that many readers have misconceived. I have tried to re-create the Michel Angelo of the *Letters* and the *Rime*, the man in his daily life, the Orestes tormented by the furies, the Prometheus gnawed by the vulture, the Self-Executioner. I had been penetrated by the cry of his suffering, and I gave it forth again without attenuation, without addition... The shadow presupposes the light. The crucified one bore it within him; and I do not forget it. Nor should the public that reads me forget it. The Buonarotti who groans like Job on his dunghill has come down from his scaffolding in the Sistine, where, his head thrown back, he has just been contemplating Jehovah face to face in the blue gap of the sky. When afterwards he stumbles back to life, he suffers from the vertigo of the whirlwind of God. In my *Life of*

*Michel Angelo* I tried to express this divine vertigo."<sup>1</sup>

Not every reader will be satisfied with this interpretation, partly because not everybody is "penetrated by the cry of suffering" as Rolland was, and partly also because they were not used to this psychological treatment of the creative process. Beethoven had always seemed to the average Frenchman a teutonic savage whose music could hardly compensate for his obvious lack of "good manners". But Michel Angelo was different. He was a Latin who lived in the most glorious epoch of rejuvenated classical art in Europe, one whose statues and paintings exhaled nothing but a love of harmony and perfect beauty. Did not Rolland transform this genius of form into a germanic super-hero, they asked, a forerunner of Nietzsche's superman with his divided soul and his craving for the impossible on earth?

Actually Rolland could very well see the difference between a statue of Michel Angelo and a symphony of Beethoven. The difference was not only the medium employed, it was also an obvious difference in their approach to life, and, not least of all, a difference of temperament: "But while in the grandiose intellectualism of Michel Angelo, the master-workman, the line is dry, cold and abstract, Beethoven's line is always full and moist with sap, like the spring-filled tree-trunks of the fine Gothic portals."<sup>2</sup> But the question of "line" is ultimately one of form only. It does not affect the "soul" of the creator. For, however chaotic the inner life of the artist may be, his "will" or his "reason" will subdue the storm within.

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(1) *Beethoven the Creator*, pp. 8<sup>b</sup>

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 78.



Beethoven succeeded only partly; in Michel Angelo's figures we no longer are aware of the "whirlwind of God"; there is the serenity of complete resignation, a kind of sombre joy of having succeeded in repressing what was evil in him.

Art critics, as a rule, are hardly interested at all in the psychology of creation. Their proverbial lack of sensitiveness automatically prevents them from seeing beyond the "line". The creator's mind remains sealed to them for ever. But Rolland always wanted to read "between the lines", whether they were musical lines or the lines of colour or the printed word. And with an obsession peculiar to his own temperament, he always found suffering where others had seen only joy. Beethoven's suffering was that of a death-struggle between the Ego and the Universe; it was also the tragedy of his deafness which Rolland always considered to be the result of his superhuman struggle for self-realization.<sup>1</sup> Michel Angelo's suffering was personal in its very essence; it was something inborn, an inherent morbidity which he could never shake off, however much he tried. And when his "daimon", his genius, took hold of him, of his body and of his soul, it was like an alien thing within him for ever growing, and his will was powerless to resist it. Michel Angelo's creation of immortal beauty was the result of a continuous defeat of his own self. Out of his melancholy nature, and its self-imposed suffering, came the joy of the beautiful form. Fate had not been unkind to Michel Angelo as it had been to Beethoven. He was the undisputed master-artist of

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(1) For a detailed discussion see Rolland's analysis of Beethoven's deafness with reference to yoga in Chapter VII of this book.

his age. His environment was thirsty for beauty and the ground had been prepared to receive his works. But "suffering is infinite, and displays itself in myriad ways. Sometimes it arises from the blind things of tyranny, coming as poverty, sickness, the injustice of fate, or the wickedness of men; sometimes its deepest cause lies in the sufferer's own nature. This is no less lamentable, no less disastrous; for we do not choose our own dispositions, we have not asked for life as it is given us, we have not wished to become what we are."<sup>1</sup> While Beethoven achieved greatness both as an artist and as a man, Michel Angelo is only the hero as artist. Again and again his human qualities failed him.

How significant is, for instance, his constant longing for beauty. Never did he see the spirit below the beauty of the flesh. The object of his adoration was for him indeed an idol. He humiliated himself before it, and yet only too frequently beauty appeared to him in the shape of worthless human beings who did not deserve this self-imposed sacrifice on the part of the artist. But there was the beauty of the flesh—rather insipid intellectually and often morally corrupt—that seemed to him the very incarnation of God on earth. With trembling hands he took his first sketches; and yet in the complete work of art, all the anguish and self-torture have vanished. Out of the darkness light has come again. But this light is not for Michel Angelo: he stumbles from darkness to darkness, unconscious of the opening between the clouds.

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(1) Romain Rolland : *Life of Michel Angelo*.

And if we want to know what Romain Rolland, the biographer, thought of this tormented soul, we have only to look at those innumerable autobiographical pages in his *Jean Christophe*. For more often than not Jean Christophe is Romain Rolland himself: "Only for Michel Angelo did we have a secret feeling of pious sympathy, with his tragic sufferings, his divine contempt, and the loftiness of his chaste passions. With a pure barbaric love, like that of the master, he loved the religious nudity of his youths, his shy, wild virgins, like wild creatures caught in a trap, the sorrowful Aurora, the wild-eyed Madonna, with her child biting at her breast, and the lovely Lia whom he would fain have had to wife. But in the soul of the tormented hero he found nothing more than the echo of his own."<sup>1</sup>

Michel Angelo appears, at first sight, to be an anticlimax after Beethoven. For there is no "greatness" in the aimless suffering of a man—however great his art might be. And Rolland himself admits, that in this first volume on Michel Angelo he was concerned with the man rather than with the artist. All these letters and poems which he quotes, these eccentric relationships with exceedingly mediocre people, all this purposeless "suffering", these are not "great". And the biographer realizes that such a book, if misunderstood, might do more harm than good. For what useful purpose, he asks himself at the end of his *Life of Michel Angelo*, can a book serve which only adds the sufferings of the great ones on earth to our own unhappiness? Have we not enough to bear ourselves? "Should I not have shown," he continues,

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*Christophe* (The New Dawn), III, pp. 879-80.

"as so many others have done, only the heroism of the heroes and should I have spread a veil over the abyss of their sorrows?...I have not promised my friends a happiness bought at the price of a lie, not a happiness in spite of everything and at any price. I have promised them truth, even at the price of happiness, the manly truth which gives form to the eternal souls. Its breath is harsh, but it is pure; let us bathe our weak souls in it. Great souls are like mountain peaks. Storms lash them; clouds envelop them; but on the peaks we breathe more freely than elsewhere. In that pure atmosphere, the wounds of the heart are cleansed; and when the cloudbanks part, we gain a view of all mankind."

But Michel Angelo was not a "hero of the soul" like Beethoven. His life was dedicated to the worship of beauty,—and the serenity of his creation was rather the result of a gigantic will-power than of his human qualities. And while in everyone of Beethoven's works the Ego triumphed, Michel Angelo had to subdue it constantly in stone or in colour. Only in his letters and poems it broke through in a bewildering loss of self-restraint.

Once more Rolland lifts himself up and looks around the peaks still to be climbed. Again he lands on a storm-tossed mountain. There are flat and limitless plains stretching to the farthest horizon. A cold wind howls over the steppes, and he can hear, as before, the cries of anguish of the multitudes from below. Gone are the courtiers of Vienna and their polished manners, the ladies in silk, and starlit nights over the Danube; gone the palaces of Italy, the cloudless sky, the virility of an expansive age. There is a pea-

sant sitting by the roadside not far from a railway-station. The evening is bitter cold and snow begins to fall. Leafless trees stretch their branches to a sombre sky. What is he doing there, this Russian peasant in his simple dress? Why are his lips moving as though in prayer? Is he also waiting for a new age to come? Is this again one of the great hours of the spirit when out of the unbearable suffering of the one, a joy and happiness for all will spring? Is this Russian peasant who has lost his way on the windy steppe, one of the forerunners of a new humanity?

#### IV

When Rolland published his biography of Tolstoy, in 1911, he could look back on almost half a century of strenuous labour, his research on the history of music, his plays, his biographies of Beethoven and Michel Angelo, and almost all the volumes of Jean Christophe. He was no longer a young man. The first enthusiasm of youth has vanished. Rolland pays back his debt to his master.

But his angle of vision has shifted. Although it is still the "heroism of suffering" that interests him most, it is no longer a suffering due to fate—as in the case of Beethoven—or an inborn melancholy—as with Michel Angelo—but self-imposed suffering, a kind of penance and purification that attracts him in Tolstoy. Rolland's mind had matured in these years: he realized now that the passive suffering of a man of genius, however tragic it may be, lies on a lower level of human experience than the active suffering of the creative mind. In the past it was always creation

because of suffering; now it is suffering because of creation. It is indeed a sacrifice of one's Ego, deliberately chosen for the sake of an ultimate realization.

This undoubtedly is a step forward in Rolland's own evolution. Neither Beethoven nor Michel Angelo ever stimulated his conscience to action. They were too far removed, lost among the clouds. The joy and beauty they created was "above" all standards of morality. They elevate our mental or affective life and in that sense they also, though unconsciously, are creators of values. But Tolstoy was a much more conscious artist. He was not out to create beauty either in sounds or in stone or colour. The word as used by a conscious artist implies a much more critical attitude towards life. It immediately involves the writer in the problem of truth which is singularly absent from the other arts. For who can say what is a "true" sound in a symphony or a "true" colour in a painting. But a word is either true or false. And the standard by which we test the "truth" of a word is life itself as it is experienced by each one of us. Indeed we also experience sounds and colour; but this experience never implies a moral valuation: the writing or reading of literature does. The creation of a book is always an attempt at valuation. For though a sound or a colour may exist as "pure" form, literature, the spoken or written word, always demands from the writer the highest degree of critical intelligence.

But "truth" is often evil. The naked image of life is not beautiful. And when the deaf Beethoven strove after complete harmony of sounds and the haunted

Michel Angelo after complete beauty of pictorial form, they could achieve it by substituting a truly beautiful illusion for the crude truth of real life. For them neither the havoc created by Napoleon's armies nor the cruelties of a Pope really mattered. Their responsibility was towards their own soul and their own art, not towards their contemporaries. But a word leads to action. Only the "false" word creates an illusion of beauty and provides men with that self-satisfaction and complacency that seem to make life worth living for them. But the truly great writer will attempt to banish all illusions from his work. In this attempt there is the beginning of the writer's conflict and his suffering. For he strives after beauty as intensely as the musician or the painter. And truth is ugly—especially in the Europe of the last century. A conflict of conscience is added—like a new dimension—in Romain Rolland's biography of Tolstoy. For in the expression of truth, the reality of immediate experiences, the illusory beauty with which art was mostly concerned in the past will get lost. And this conflict of conscience leads Rolland to the new awareness of "the dissonance between his pitiless vision which enabled him to see all the horror of reality, and his compassionate heart which made him desire to veil these horrors and retain his readers' affection. We have all experienced this tragic struggle. How often has the artist been filled with distress when contemplating a truth which he will have to describe. For this same healthy and virile truth, which for some is as natural as the air they breathe, is absolutely unsupportable to others, who are weak through the

tenor of their lives or through simple kindness. What are we to do? Are we to suppress this deadly truth, or to utter it unsparingly? For continually does the dilemma force itself upon us, Truth or Love?"<sup>1</sup>

Romain Rolland's biography of Tolstoy is indeed the biography of the living conscience of Europe, and in more than one sense, also a confession of Rolland's own conscience. From the time of his first letter to Tolstoy, he had been haunted by the problem of art as a socially creative force. And he felt that Tolstoy was the only one in modern times to have solved it. By lifting himself up above all classes and creeds, above all schools and movements, Tolstoy had achieved a universality which applied to all the people of Europe alike and no longer to any particular caste. And just as Tolstoy uses the word caste in his reply to the young Frenchman, so also Rolland takes up the same argument in connection with Tolstoy's own work: "Yes, the whole of our art is nothing but the expression of a caste, sub-divided, from one nation to another, into small opposing groups. There is not one artistic soul in Europe which unites in itself all the parties and races. The most universal, in our own time, was that of Tolstoy. In him we have loved each other, the men of all the countries and all the classes. And anyone who has tasted as we have done, the powerful joy of his vast love, will never again be satisfied with the fragments of the great human soul which the art of the European coteries offers us."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Romain Rolland: *Life of Tolstoy*.

2. *Ibid.*



But the universality of Tolstoy's art is not its distinctive feature. It is an art which calls men to purposeful action. Beethoven and Michel Angelo might have inspired many an admirer to action, but direction and guidance were lacking. In Tolstoy the need for action becomes obvious: not only is it explicitly stated in his novels and essays, but there is between the lines an implicit moral urge towards action which distinguishes Tolstoy from Rolland's other heroes. And action based upon a revaluation of life, ultimately means social action: "But as Tolstoy was not a Hindu mystic for whom extasis is enough, as in him were mingled the dreams of the Asiatic with the mania for reason and the need for action of the man of the West, he had afterwards to translate his revelation into a practical faith and to deduce from this divine existence rules for our daily life."<sup>2</sup>

Here Rolland reaches a point where doubt for the first time assails him. If indeed it is the noblest function of a writer in our time to show the way to action, and especially to the right kind of action, the agonies of an over-strained sensibility, the self-imposed sufferings of a tormented soul, have no place in the work of art. And yet Tolstoy's own life was full of torment and unhappiness. If the "faith" of a writer should lead to action, then this faith must indeed be complete. And yet there is much that remains fragmentary in Tolstoy's faith. Tolstoy, the artist, has always seemed to Rolland to be above criticism; but Tolstoy, the man, made him ultimately doubt his greatness. For there was much in Tolstoy's

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2. Romain Rolland : *Life of Tolstoy*.

faith that remained unrealized; he could never raise himself above the level of the intellectual with his tormented soul unable to live up to his own convictions. Already during the war, when the problem of action was more acute in Rolland's life than at any other time, he expresses his first doubts as regards Tolstoy's faith: "In order to have Tolstoy's faith, it is not enough to have his large heart, it is almost as necessary not to have everything that he did not have . . . And he himself, Tolstoy, could not enter into it easily. The man of faith is admirable. But in order to be indeed a man of faith, one has to live it completely. This Tolstoy has not done, though he wished to do it."<sup>1</sup>

Thus Tolstoy, the idol of his youth, the "forerunner" of the modern age, is another Hamlet with an eternally divided soul. His moral conscience did not help him to live well. And though he took up arms against a sea of troubles, he could only, at best, give solace to those who suffer, he could not abolish suffering. Some may think this to be a strange argument in the mouth of Romain Rolland who had always withdrawn from the actual fight, who till now always hesitated to sacrifice his vocation for the sake of social progress. But we must not forget that a good deal of the disillusionment with Tolstoy started after the war, when he himself had realised the need for action and had tried to live up to the demands of his own conscience. Within this context of Rolland's own evolution, much of his criticism is justified.

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1. From a letter to P. J. Jouve, 19-7-1916; quoted in P. J. Jouve, *Romain Rolland Vivant*, 1920, p. 71/2

We can distinguish two aspects in his criticism of Tolstoy. The one is based on Tolstoy's complete non-attachment to life in his old age, the other on his inability to act. Tolstoy in his old age had undoubtedly reached a stage when the non-attachment of the Buddhists seemed to him the highest solution of all problems. He had studied Buddhistic doctrines and Hindu and Chinese philosophy, and he had found in the East all those spiritual elements of life which the Europe of his own time was lacking. Although Romain Rolland had already during the war become acquainted with Eastern religions and philosophy, he was still groping in the dark. He saw in Tolstoy's final non-attachment a denial of all active life, a denial also of intelligence and discrimination. And Rolland suspects the old Tolstoy of a tendency towards that same "Nirvana," the "nothingness," that darkened his adolescence, and from which he himself wanted to save humanity. In a conversation with his friend P. J. Jouve, during the war in Switzerland, Rolland attempts an analysis of Tolstoy's thought which is of particular interest in connection with Rolland's own development and his later attitude towards the East: "This is the thought of the old Tolstoy: 'If I still experience the fear of death, it is because I do not love yet all men equally,' this great idea leads towards the inhuman. For to break with all preferences means to sacrifice for ever one's family, one's relatives, one's friends, one's heart . . . Jesus himself never went as far; he has his preferences, affections, he resuscitates his friend Lazarus. And anyhow Tolstoy has never attained his aim.—The

ideal, made absolute, becomes renunciation of individual life, of human life, it becomes non-life. It is immolation before human violence; even more, it is immolation before all the violence of nature and the animal species.—It would be necessary then, like Buddha the liberator, to withdraw from all living creatures and to return to the Nirvana.”<sup>1</sup>

It is a short step only from this conception of the Nirvana to a denial of all action. How can Tolstoy be a guiding moral force, if he consciously withdraws from life, from the problems of violence, human suffering, and oppression. This is not an active faith any longer. And at the same time as he was working on his biography of Mahatma Gandhi, Rolland gives vent to his ever-increasing doubt: “You refer to Tolstoy’s *Confessions* as having made a deep impression on you. The *Confessions* are admirable. The anguish of Tolstoy *vis-a-vis* the miseries of humanity are poignant. But I must say nevertheless that Tolstoy is a bad guide. His tormented genius has always been incapable of finding a practical way out. His deep fraternal compassion induced him to condemn art and science as being the privilege of the elite only. And his philanthropy did not help him a bit, in that it did not help him alleviate the suffering of others. It only made him miserable and fretful . . . And if he had not conquered the world by the glory of his great art, his moral and religious thought would never have spread everywhere with such far-reaching repercussions.”<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately Rolland is never as definite as he should have been in his later criticism of Tolstoy. At

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1. 1st February 1917; quoted in P. J. Jouve, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

2. Letter to Dilip Kumar Roy, March 1922, quoted in *Anand*.

times, however, it seems that since the war he has realized that the artist's true function is—not only to create forms of ever-lasting beauty—but also to incarnate the very conscience of his age. Tolstoy did so only in his books, he says. His art and his faith are two different and contradictory elements in his nature. Tolstoy never succeeded to evolve a common frame of reference, a unifying principle, into which both his art and his moral or religious doctrines would fit. Two years later, in a conversation during the International Musical Festival at Prague, in 1924, Rolland again touches upon this subject: "Tolstoy is so great," he says, "he embraces in his mind so many things that, whoever comes near him, can choose according to his taste. As far as I am concerned, I find that Tolstoy's ethical doctrine and his life contradict each other. No, not in a bad sense. I do not accuse Tolstoy of 'inconsistency.' No, but what I wish to say is that his life and his doctrine are two different elements. Tolstoy himself does not seem to feel at home in his moral speculations."<sup>1</sup>

Who, then, is the true artist? Did ever the artistic conscience of any one person become the guiding principle of an age? Can the suffering of the individual soul lead to the salvation of others? Does not the artistic impulse, by its very nature, prevent the artist from acting? Do not the creator and the people represent the two opposite poles of humanity between which there is a gulf never to be crossed? These are some of the questions which the reader asks himself when he has read through these three biographies. He

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1. Reported by Valentin Boulgakov, in *Romain Rolland's Birthday-Book*, p. 101.

has found harmony in a discordant life, beauty springing from inherent morbidity, a call to action from one who is unable to act. And between all the lines of music, colour, and words, he has seen Rolland's own face, a face that grows older as the years advance, more speculative, but also more active and alert; he is ready now to sacrifice himself in action, to sacrifice everything—except the spirit.

For much has happened between his writing the biography of Michel Angelo and his book on Tolstoy. This latest biography of Rolland is like an after-thought, a supplement to the first volumes of *Jean Christophe*. And this novel of his which it took him almost a decade to write is indeed the work of his maturity. He has learnt much from the lives of his masters. He has learnt from them the mysticism of action and creation, and the joy which is born of suffering. Rolland comes down from the snow-capped mountain-tops, the peaks where the air was so fresh and transparent and pure. And he looks around him in this first dawn of the century. And Jean Christophe, the eternal wanderer, goes from city to city, from one land to another, until he has covered the whole of Europe. He looks back and wonders: it is very small, this Europe of ours, with its narrow horizon, its factories blotting out the sky, and its wars for ever spreading across a tired land. Jean Christophe is Europe. He has all her virtues and some of her vices. His suffering is great; and so is his fulfilment. All the greatness of the past is flowing in his veins. All the mediocrity of the present is standing up against him. Only the future which he carries within him will lead him to action.

## FULFILMENT

NOTHING is more fascinating than the story of the rise to fame of a writer. In modern times this is largely also the story of an economically or politically controlled public opinion. The press can indeed make or unmake a writer. Intelligent book-reviews have no place in the daily paper. Literature—except in its more sensational aspects—has never as yet found a place on the front-page. It is relegated to the end, a few hastily written and uncritical paragraphs, sandwiched between advertisements and sport-news.

Romain Rolland at forty was unknown to the French reading public. Neither his twelve plays nor his biographies attracted the attention they deserved. Only his Beethoven, it is true, had found many admirers. They were spread across the length and breadth of France; but they did not as yet constitute an audience eager for more books from the author. This biography was not a literary success. It had a strong individual appeal, and people spoke about it for some months. But the press kept silent. And this silence continued throughout the whole decade that Romain Rolland was at work on his *Jean Christophe*. In the meantime he had given up his post at the Sorbonne; the marriage which he had concluded shortly after his return from Italy proved to be unhappy. More and more he withdrew from life. In his attic in the Mont-

parnasse-quarter, surrounded by a few engravings on the wall, photographs of friends, and a bust of Beethoven, innumerable manuscripts and books, he writes his *Jean Christophe*. Only from time to time he escapes from the narrow walls of his study, and like his hero, crosses and re-crosses Europe in search of a refuge from the trivialities of life. Thus he actually began his book in a remote hamlet in Switzerland; part of the first volume also was written in Zurich and by the shores of Lake Zug; much in Paris and in Italy; *Antoinette* in Oxford, while the work—after more than ten years' labour—was completed in Baveno. The first volume was published in the "Cahiers de la Quinzaine" in February 1902; the last serial number was issued on October 20, 1912. But the work of preparation began much earlier. Already in 1895 the broad outline of the novel was finished. In Italy itself, during his conversations with Malwida von Meysenbug, he had realized that the struggles of obscure heroes belong in truth to every age. Also the story she told him about the tragic friendship and struggles of her intimate friends Wanger and Nietzsche, contributed not a little to a peculiar, though probably largely unconscious, identification between these two great men and the figures of his vision. It was also during a walk on the Janiculum in Rome, that this vision grew clear before his eyes: his hero was to be a musician, a German, a free and pure spirit, who, though rejected by his contemporaries, will fight his way through to fulfilment. Another "hero of faith," a pure-hearted Parsifal, in search of certainty and truth. Another "hero of suffering" whose



rise to fame will be a symbol of the new-born faith of a future generation. It is strange to think that this story of struggle, solitude, suffering, and ultimate fulfilment, should have brought Rolland the fame he had deserved long ago. Was it not as though Rolland held up a mirror to his readers, and when they found themselves reflected in it, their age, their own struggles and solitude, their own craving for fulfilment, they applauded? For as children like seeing their own image in a looking-glass, so they also enjoyed this picture of good and evil, truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness. All of a sudden they saw their own life. And despite all evil, falsehood, and ugliness, they applauded. They had forgotten what life really looked like. The reflection they saw in the mirror was not flattering, but it was well done. They did not know that life could be like that. But they took *Jean Christophe* at its face value. This was not the time to ask questions and to doubt. They believed in Rolland's sincerity and in the seriousness of his book. They saw in it the reflections of a mature intellect, of a conscience at work. And those who very closely looked at the image in the mirror could see behind all the evil, and falsehood, and ugliness, Rolland's face. For whoever Jean Christophe may be, Beethoven or Michel Angelo or Tolstoy, or all of them together, ultimately he was Rolland himself. Although it would be futile to refer the incidents in this novel to Rolland's own life, there is no doubt that he depicted himself in the hero of this book. Jean Christophe is Rolland's own wish-fulfilment, his dream. This is how he would have liked to be. And if indeed a man's "character" comprises, not only what he actually is,

but also what he would like to be, if every character is a synthesis of reality and dream, actual achievements and desires, then Jean Christophe is Rolland himself, as seen through his own eyes. It is the mirror of his soul infinitely enlarged, as though under a microscope. It is the final identification of his own self with the soul of Europe.

## II

Literary critics have tried to explain the success of this book in various ways. For some it was a revelation comparable only to Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and *Resurrection*. Others were quickly disillusioned and found it confusing in form and too emotional in contents. Some could never forgive him for having broken away from the French tradition of logic and psychological analysis. They accused him of looseness of emotions and thoughts, a certain sloppiness in the treatment of his subject-matter, and an unorthodox use of the French language. No other country in Europe is as obsessed by the idea of "tradition" in literature as France; and no other country has produced as many movements and schools, each one of them breaking with tradition and yet finally coming back to it again.

Romain Rolland never founded a literary school. His *Jean Christophe* is a solitary giant in the literature of Europe. Rolland was as alone at the beginning as at the end of his book. He established no new literary traditions. French critics at all times tried their best to ignore him. That is why *Jean Christophe* has never been a literary success in France—as it became soon after the war all over Europe and Asia. But

even in France it was a great personal success, inspite of all "literary tradition." And if we want to look for the reasons for this success, we have to understand first of all what happened to literature at the beginning of this century. For there is no doubt that the obvious failure of the contemporary novel in France contributed a great deal to Rolland's success.

One by one the great novelists had died during Rolland's childhood and youth. Flaubert, the greatest of them all, an artist of pure form and deep insight into human nature, had died when Rolland was only fifteen years old, in 1880. Maupassant followed in 1893, leaving to the world the literary fragments of a great mind struggling in darkness; three years later, in 1896, dies one of the leaders of the naturalistic novel, Edmond Goncourt. And shortly after the publication of the first volume of *Jean Christophe*, Emile Zola who had dominated the French literary scene for good many years, is taken to his grave, followed by all the intellectual leaders of France. Three of the greatest poets of the century had died in quick succession before Rolland was thirty-five years old; Laforgue in 1887, Verlaine in 1896, Mallarmé in 1898. Among the novelists who still remained, there was only Anatole France, whose scepticism and resigned wisdom could not inspire the new generation, Paul Bourget, the Hamlet of modern French literature, and Pierre Loti, who escaped to the South-Sea as Josef Conrad died in England at about the same time. As regard poets, there were his two friends from the *Normal School*, Paul Claudel and Charles Peguy; the former turning increasingly towards religion, the latter being killed soon after the publication of *Jean Christophe* in the

first battle of the Marne. France, the stronghold of literature in Europe, had lost almost all her intellectual leaders within a few decades. A kind of literary vacuum had been created. The naturalistic novel had died a natural death. It was Rolland's mission to fill the gap between Zola's death and the rise of a new generation of writers after the last war.

And if we look across the borders of France, we shall find a similar literary vacuum in almost all the western countries of Europe. Rationalism and the Victorian belief in science and the human intellect had played out. The contemporary novel in England was indeed a true reflection of a civilization on the decline. Only the external decorum remained. Inside it was rotten to the very core. The Irish revival had no doubt given a new impetus to literary creation; but it was localised and never spread over the whole of England. But there were the last remnants of the naturalistic or realistic novel, H. G. Wells, G. K. Chesterton, Arnold Bennett, Galsworthy,—all of them helplessly struggling against their own loss of convictions and beliefs. And Thomas Hardy's great novels and poems were like the funeral song of the nineteenth century. Only in Joseph Conrad and D. H. Lawrence can we feel the first breath of a new dawn.

Contemporary with *Jean Christophe* also are the translations from other countries which were not without a considerable influence on the French reading public—as also on Rolland himself. There were, of course, Tolstoy and Dostojevski; more than once did Rolland speak of the influence the latter exercised upon his mind and work. Among the Scandinavians, Ibsen and Bjoernson opened up new lines of thought

regarding both the drama and the novel. And there was the Italian d'Annuncio whose wild melancholy proved that even Latin people had a less rational and logical "soul" than they had been made to believe in the past.

*Jean Christophe* is a novel of transition; it hesitates between the past and the future and draws inspiration from both. It is, in the widest sense of the term, a novel of tradition also: for, from being an abstract literary principle, tradition has become life again in this story of an artist. And as all tradition is the living past reborn in the present and carrying within itself the germs of the future, so also all the characters, events, landscapes and people in this novel, are rooted in a for-ever receding past and point towards a future which they will never experience. They are the inheritors of time and also those who are chosen to fulfil it.

### III

A novel the very subject-matter of which is the living tradition of Europe, must also be a novel of resurrection. We can follow individuals and nations from defeat to resurrection, from darkness to light. *Christophe* in his endless struggles against an environment that rejects him, against his own country and against the country in which he has sought refuge, against his friends and those whom he loves, against contemporary music and many of his past masters, is reborn again and again with greater wisdom and maturity. But *Christophe* is not a weakling: like Beethoven—whom at times he resembles—his is a strong soul; and every defeat means for him more

than a casual failure. It will take him months or even years to recover. But then, one day, the will to live and to create comes back and defeat is transformed into resurrection. Often it is music that brings him back to life, sometimes a smiling face on the street or in a drawing-room, a long walk under heavy clouds, or a picture by Rembrandt in the Louvre. It is then that the creative process begins anew: a song or a symphony is born out of the chaos of darkness: "It was as though the living God was rushing into his empty soul. The Resurrection! . . . The air poured down his throat, the flood of a new life swelled through him and penetrated to his very marrow. He felt like bursting, he wanted to shout, to shout for joy and sorrow: and there would only come inarticulate sounds from his mouth. He reeled, he beat on the walls with his arms, while all around him were sheets of paper flying on the wind."<sup>1</sup>

But even beyond the individual craving for survival and creation there is also the social group, the nation. Here too Rolland sees the same process at work. For time, he says, is like the sea: sometimes a people is carried on the crest of a wave, sometimes it sinks down into impenetrable darkness. But while the average historian would consider this eternal change a mere matter of external circumstances, a question of political groupings or economic policies or strategy, Rolland sees therein the death and revival of the spirit of a nation. He is still as preoccupied as ever with the problem of defeat. Only the perspective has changed: it is no longer the individual who alone matters, but also the social context within which the individual has

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1. *Jean Christophe*, (The Burning Bush). III, p. 335.

his being. And the environment in which Christophe and Olivier live is defeated France, thirsting for revenge. Olivier, the Frenchman, realises only too well the implications of this defeat: "Fortunate the defeat, blessed the disaster," he exclaims to his friend, "Not for us to disavow it, for we are its children . . . It is you, my dear Christophe, who have refashioned us . . . Our defeat, little as you may have wished it, has done us more good than evil. You have rekindled the torch of idealism, have given a fresh impetus to our science, and have reanimated our faith . . . We owe to you the reawakening of our racial conscience . . ."<sup>1</sup>

We shall probably not be wrong if we assume that this idea of resurrection was constantly in Rolland's mind while writing this book. Only he wanted to lift it up higher and higher, above the individual and even the nation, embracing the so warmly desired revival of Europe. For this indeed was a time ripe for "revivals," and intellectuals in all the countries were looking hopefully forward to a restatement of values. And as shortly before the French revolution, the European mind was anxiously waiting for the new breath that would sweep away the rottenness of the past, so also now Europe was conscious of the first stirrings of a new world. Rolland and Christophe had seen the old generation die. Nothing remains now but to wait for the new one to destroy the hollowness of the past. For in the life of mankind the new generation is the resurrection: "You young men," Rolland exclaims, "you men of to-day, march over us, trample us under your feet, and press onward. Be ye greater and happier than we. For myself, I bid the soul that

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1. *Jean Christophe*, II.

was mine farewell. I cast it from me like an empty shell. Life is a succession of deaths and resurrections. We must die, Christophe, to be born again."<sup>1</sup>

The continuous spiritual or moral transformation of individuals as well as of nations is the subject-matter of *Jean Christophe*. Generations pass before our eyes, and in the conflict between the old and the new the heroes of this European drama march from childhood to old age. But some, such as Olivier, are born to die young; they are submerged by the conflict, unable to establish an equilibrium between the old and the new. Every individual stands in some relation to the flux of time. Some are with the old and cannot break away from the ruins of past greatness. They never fulfil life. It is rather life that fulfils them and they are the passive inheritors of a dying time. But there are others, and Christophe is one of them, who move forward with their generation, who climb across the wreckage, and build up a new vision around them. And in their old age, they have to re-adjust themselves to a rhythm of growth which they themselves have helped to create. Christophe revolted all through his life against the old order of things. Again and again he was defeated. But when he himself grows old, he has lost all his prejudices and the hatred of his youth. He looks at the new youth and rejoices in its desire to destroy and to create anew: "They have learned from us," he says, "and they are ungrateful; such is the inevitable succession of events. Enriched by our efforts, they advance further than we were able to advance, realising the conquests which we struggled to achieve. If any of the freshness of youth yet

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1. *Ibid.*, Preface to the last volume, *The New Dawn*; III, p. 848.



lingers in us, let us learn from them, and seek to rejuvenate ourselves. If this is beyond our powers, if we are too old to do so, let us at least rejoice that they are young."<sup>1</sup>

In order to depict the conflict and tension between generations, it was necessary to realise that the transformation of moral and spiritual values takes place at an accelerated speed in modern society, that sometimes within the life-span of one single generation values and beliefs have been subjected to fundamental changes, and that it needs a large heart and a broad mind to keep pace with them. It took European writers a long time to realize the differences in mental or moral evolution between the nineteenth century and modern times. Gone for ever are the static conception of life, the belief in the invincibility of human reason; gone also is the religious faith in the church as a unifying factor in western civilization; gone finally, is the belief in the supremacy of science. Modern man—despite all his mental confusion and emotional chaos—has, however, at least one advantage over his immediate predecessors: his elasticity of mind. Rolland was one of the first to realize it: "The development of European thought is proceeding at a livelier pace, much as if its acceleration were concomitant with the advance in our power of mechanical locomotion. . . . The stores of prejudices and hopes which in former times would have nourished mankind for twenty years, are exhausted now in a lustrum. In intellectual matters the generations gallop one after another, and sometimes out-space one another."<sup>2</sup>

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1. *Jean Christophe*, III.

2. Quoted in Stefan Zweig, *op. cit.* p. 282/3.

Rolland showed us this interplay of generations in terms of individual destinies. Every character carries within him his own unconscious interpretation of life. And we, the readers, see the generations through their eyes. For they are both within the conflict and without, actors and spectators at the same time. The comparison with the theatre is not out of place: for even while they act, they observe the other actors on the stage. And they know that they themselves are also being observed.

#### IV

Characterisation in a novel may be purely fictitious and based on the writer's own observation of human nature; or it may be determined by historical facts and data. Rolland uses both the methods side by side. Jean Christophe himself is a synthesis of a large number of characters, mostly belonging to musicians of the past. At first he seems to be Beethoven. And if we remember that his *Life of Beethoven* falls in the same period as the first volumes of *Jean Christophe* we need not be unduly surprised at this similarity. So greatly was Rolland at that time absorbed in the life and work of his master, that historical truth and his own imagination freely intermingle. Jean Christophe grew up in the Rhineland which was also Beethoven's home; he had, like Beethoven, Flemish blood in his veins; his mother, too, was of peasant origin while his father was a drunkard. The letter which the young Christophe is made to write to the Grand Duke is modelled on historical document; his acquaintance with Frau von Kerisch recalls Beethoven and Frau von

Breuning. On the other hand, many of the incidents of Christophe's youth remind us of one of the sons of Johann Sebastian Bach, Friendemann Bach; the scene in the castle is obviously modelled on a similar event in Mozart's childhood; Mozart's little love episode with Rose Cannabich is also transferred to Christophe's life.

Thus even in his childhood, Jean Christophe combines the characteristics of several great musicians. The older he grows, the less does he resemble Beethoven. In character he is more like Gluck, and especially Handel. As has already been mentioned, Wagner's life history had a profound influence on the delineation of Jean Christophe; especially so his flight to Paris, the sordidness of his daily life there, his poverty, the necessity he found himself in to do hackwork for minor publishers; all these events were taken over almost verbatim from Wagner's own autobiographical sketches in "A German musician in Paris." But even if we leave out the external incidents in Christophe's life, there still remains the character, both as a musician and as a man. And here another great master of music in the nineteenth century provided Rolland with almost all the elements for Christophe's character. Rolland had read Ernst Decsey's *Life of Hugo Wolf*, whose fame rests mainly upon his songs. Not only do we find individual incidents taken from Decsey's book such as his dislike for Brahms, the visit he paid to Wagner (Hassler), his work in musical criticism, but also his whole character, and especially his method of musical creation, is transplanted into the soul of Jean Christophe. In both of them alike we find the sudden

volcanic eruptions of creative power and the equally sudden gloom that descends upon the composer's mind and prevents him from creating anything at all for months together. Although physically Christophe reminds us of Beethoven, Gluck, and Handel, mentally and emotionally he is much nearer to the great song-composer. At times he has also the serenity and child-like joy of a Schubert. And yet, although he combines in himself the lives of almost all the great composers of the past, he is himself a modern composer, in the fullest sense of term. He experiments with new forms of music, new musical structures and harmonies; he is all the time out to capture the spirit of his own age in sounds. That is how Jean Christophe—as a musician—reaches across the generations, embracing within him all that was great in the past, and yet being intensely alive to his mission in the present. In that sense, he is not only an individual musician, living the life of his own generation; he represents symbolically music as a whole.

But not only musical history provided Rolland with subject-matter and characters. Christophe's encounter with the French players reminds us of a similar incident in Goethe's autobiography; Christophe's flight into the forest recalls the story of Tolstoy's last days. And not only Tolstoy, Nietzsche also is ever present in the restless wanderings of the hero of the novel. Then there is Antoinette, a picture of Renan's sister; the actress Francoise Oudon, who recalls Elanore Duse and, in some respects also, Suzanne Deprés. Emmanuel reminds us of Rolland's friend, the poet Charles Peguy; and among the minor characters we

find hints which suggest the modern composer Debussy and the poets Verhaeren and Moreas. Not a few persons were struck by the similarities in character of deputies, musical and literary critics, newspaper-owners, with actually living personalities, and there is no doubt that Rolland had definite persons in mind at whom he aimed his satire of French society and art in *The Market Place*.

It is true, there is one character in the novel which is entirely fictitious, Olivier, Christophe's friend. The fact that he is the very opposite of Christophe, not only in upbringing, social environment, race and nationality, but also in his mental make-up and character, is significant. There is good reason to believe that in the character of Olivier, Rolland again introduced himself into his work. Olivier, the intellectual, the over-sensitive idealist, the gentle spirit, an unconscious pupil of Renan and Tolstoy, for ever wavering between thought and action, Olivier, who leaves this world of chaos and strife, the symbol of a better past, unable to live up to the demands of the future. It is indeed a commonplace to say that Olivier and Christophe supplement each other; actually it is Rolland himself in whom these two characters find a new and peculiar identity. Olivier was the reality, Christophe the dream; on the one hand, Rolland as he is, on the other, as he would like to be. The synthesis is complete. But the reader suspects, and rightly so, we believe, a split in the author's own personality. At the time of writing *Jean Christophe* this split undoubtedly existed: a personality which is still divided between thought and action, a Hamlet-like

perspicacity and inability to live, and a craving for unity which finds its most profound expression in his own wish-fulfilment: Jean Christophe.

## V

Jean Christophe is not only a more or less faithful picture of the characters of dead or living musicians. The fact that he was a musician made it easy enough for Rolland to identify him with the idiosyncrasies, temperament, and moods, of other musicians. But Christophe is also to a considerable extent Rolland's own creation: he endowed him with a character and an intelligence which are peculiarly his own, an outlook on life, one may almost say, a philosophy, which he could have hardly found in the lives of his past masters. There is, for instance, his restlessness which makes him wander from place to place in search of some ultimate truth, for ever trying to escape from the chaos within: "The centuries whirled through him . . . Many other Kraffts had passed through the experiences which were his on that day, and had tasted the wretchedness of the last hour on their native soil. A wandering race, banished everywhere for their independence and disturbing qualities. A race always the prey of an inner demon that never let it settle anywhere. A race attached to the soil from which it was torn, and never, never ceasing to love it."<sup>1</sup>

Christophe is one of those rare human beings who combine mental restlessness with an utter lack of sophistication. His is an elemental force, something almost primitive, obeying not so much its own laws as some unintelligible law of nature. Everything in

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1. *Jean Christophe*, (Revolt), I, p. 598.

him exhales strength, his body as well as his soul. But his intelligence is slow and rather childish. Uncouth in manners and simple-minded in speech, it takes him a long time to learn the lessons of life. "He had not the hawklike glance of Frenchmen and Jews, who discern the most trifling characteristics of all that they see. He silently absorbed everything he came in contact with, as a sponge absorbs. Not until days or hours had elapsed would he become fully aware of what had now become part of himself."<sup>1</sup> Such a character is born for intense joy and intense suffering. Nothing mediocre will satisfy him. And just as all the other heroes of Rolland's past life were great sufferers, and fulfilled themselves through suffering alone, so also Jean Christophe carries within him the conviction that it is good to suffer as long as one is strong: "Everything great is good, and the extremity of pain borders on enfranchisement. The only thing that crushes irremediably, the only thing that destroys the soul, is mediocrity of pain and joy."

The clash between this "strong" soul and his common-place environment provides the main conflict of this novel, just as it was the main reason why Rolland had written his biographies. But now he had placed his hero within the framework of a society which cultivated mediocrity deliberately and refused to tolerate greatness of any kind. It was a society of unbelievers, who had lost their faith, not only in religion, but also in moral principles. Christophe was undoubtedly part of this society. He also had to lose his beliefs and convictions first, before attaining the

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1. *Ibid.*, (The Market Place).

true faith. But instead of a long process of ratiocination, Christophe, in his child-like simplicity, carried faith within him without knowing it. This is the faith of the strong: they do not know of the existence of their own life-giving force. "For every man the gateway to eternity is in himself: for the believer as for him who everywhere denies it, and for him who doubts both life and the denial of it,—and for Christophe in whose soul there met all these opposing views of life. All the opposites became one in eternal Force. For Christophe the chief thing was to wake that Force within himself and in others, to fling armful of wood upon the fire, to feed the flames of Eternity, to make them roar and flicker. Through the voluptuous night of Paris a great flame dated in his heart. He thought himself free of Faith, and he was a living torch of Faith."<sup>1</sup>

Jean Christophe alone is like some blind force of nature, wildly struggling against himself and against others. The continuous tension within prevents him from following a consistent path of life. Although his disposition is gentle he relapses into hatred whenever circumstances are against him. He has all the lack of equilibrium and of mental balance of a genius. Alone he will never find a way to fulfilment. Love, on the other hand, does not come easily to him, surrounded as he is by highly sophisticated people. He is too uncouth and angular, and his violent temper destroys in a minute what it had taken him months or years to build up. And that Christophe finds a friend is quite in the nature of things. Olivier is his counter-

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1. *Jean Christophe (The Market Place)*, III, p. 187.



part, equally unable to shape life according to his own will. Together they are like one perfect human being, and their friendship gives them back all the peace of the spirit which they both needed so badly. "Each enriched the other's nature. Olivier had serenity of mind and a sickly body. Christophe had a mighty strength and a strong soul. They were in some sort like a blind man and a cripple. Now that they were together they felt sound and strong. Living in the shadow of Christophe Olivier recovered his joy in the light. Christophe transmitted to him something of his abundant vitality, his physical and moral robustness, which, even in sorrow, even in injustice, even in hate, inclined to optimism . . . Christophe fed on Olivier's ideas: he impregnated himself with his intellectual calmness and mental detachment, his lofty outlook, his silent understanding and mastery of things. But when they were transplanted into him, the richer soil, the virtues of his friend grew with a new and other energy."<sup>1</sup>

In some respects Olivier indeed seems a much more remarkable character than Christophe. Not only did Rolland depict in this character his own state of mind, at the time of writing the novel; Olivier also represents the average type of the French intellectual at the beginning of this century: he is the picture of a tragic and uprooted generation which was also Rolland's own. His early death symbolizes the death of his generation. Although he was not born for action, he dies in an action of utmost triviality. Did Rolland visualize already then the death of his

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1. *Jean Christophe*, (The House), II, p. 319/20.

generation on the battlefields of France? For Olivier's disappearance is symptomatic: with him disappeared the wisdom of resignation, the conception of defeat as a spiritual force, the forerunner who is crucified by the masses. The old Rolland will disappear with him not on the battlefields of France, but in his own books.

What kind of person is this Olivier in whom Rolland reflects himself? "He had a natural predisposition towards depression perhaps even towards suicide . . . he suffered from the contradiction of his nature . . . if he had had time to yield to his thoughts he would have fallen into discouragement or perhaps taken to dissipation. . . .<sup>1</sup> Olivier no longer believed. The slow disintegration of his faith . . . had ended in its complete destruction. He had suffered cruelly: for he was not of those who are strong enough or commonplace enough to dispense with faith. . . . But he was at heart a mystic. . . .<sup>2</sup> It was impossible to depend on him in spite of his intelligence and charm and his very real tender-heartedness . . .<sup>3</sup> Certain crimes, committed ages ago, still had the power to rend him, as though he himself had been their victim. He would go pale, and shudder, and be utterly miserable, as he thought how wretched he must have been who suffered them, and how many ages cut him off from his sympathy."<sup>4</sup> This is an extremely complex character, much more so than Christophe's, whose straightforwardness and simplicity made him ultimately overcome all the difficulties in his path. Also Christophe

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1. *Jean Christophe*, (Antoinette), II, p. 244.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

4. *Ibid.*, (The House), II, p. 317.

found a natural outlet in creation which was not given to Olivier. The fact that Olivier was not an artist, but an intellectual—with all the virtues and vices this world implies—is significant. Did Rolland himself at that time realize that he was lacking the artistic impulse and that all he could do was to write *about* art and artists, but that he himself could never identify himself fully with the creative process? This is indeed the tragedy of all those who are born to see deep into the meaning of things: so penetrating is their observation, so absorbed are they in the ultimate significance of reality, that there is no room left for creation and purposeful striving. It is also Rolland's own tragedy and the tragedy of all those who write *about* life and not of life.

We may apply a similar argument to Rolland's description of women-characters and of love situations. What is lacking is a strong living force, the vital urge that re-creates life in its own image. Again Rolland speaks only *about* love and *about* women; he understands them only too well; so well indeed, that he sometimes unconsciously generalises the particular aspects of a woman's character. The reader may feel at times disconcerted at the similarities between the various women-characters. Actually Rolland has always tried his best to bring out personal idiosyncrasies in characters and the essentially personal elements in love-situations; but unknowingly he emphasized those characteristics common to all of them: he generalised as all those writers do whose intellect tends towards abstraction and who cannot therefore integrate the diversity of life. There is a fascinating

though artificial unity in all his women-characters. Even such contradictory characters as Antoinette and Grazia exhibit fundamentally common traits which can also be found in most other women-characters in this novel. A short comparison will elucidate the point. Here is Antoinette: "She was not very pretty, but she had charm, and attracted attention though she did nothing to do so. She was always very simply dressed, almost always in black: she was not very tall, graceful, frail-looking; she rarely spoke: she tripped quietly through the crowded streets, avoiding attention, which, however, she attracted in spite of herself by the sweetness of the expression of her tired eyes and her pure young lips. Sometimes she saw that she had attracted notice: and though it put her to confusion she was pleased all the same. Who can say what gentle and chaste pleasure in itself there may be in so innocent a creature at feeling herself in sympathy with others?"<sup>1</sup> And here is Grazia: "The very genius of tranquillity hovered in her presence. She had that greed of sunny silence, and still contemplation, the delightful joy in the peace of living . . . What especially she had preserved out of the past was her great kindness which inspired all her other feelings. But in her luminous smile many new things were to be read: a melancholy indulgence, a little weariness, much knowledge of the ways of men, a fine irony, and tranquil commonsense."<sup>2</sup> Many a reader must have found the calmness, silence, and serene maturity of Rolland's women-characters inspiring. Indeed they usually provide Rolland with a

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1. *Jean Christophe*, (Antoinette). II, p. 286.

2. *Ibid.*, (The New Dawn), III, 364.

natural counterpart to the savage and virile violence of Christophe. But are they anything more than counterparts? They move across the stage of his life, passively, resigned, objects of desire and disillusionment. They never play a part that is entirely their own. They exist only in relation to Christophe. But their smile illumines the tragic obscurity of this heroic life. It urges him towards creation. It follows him from fulfilment to fulfilment. And he immortalises it in his work.

For love was the very background of his music. It inspired him to express in sounds both his joy and his sorrow. The demon of creation never gave him rest. Indeed all the incidents of his life were translated into harmony, and even while he was still living his experiences, they became music in his mind. The novel is full of such incidents; however trivial some of them might have been, they all enriched his creative power alike. Once he has found solitude again, sounds would break forth from their prison, and a song would be born out of nothing, as it were. Here is a representative instance. Significantly enough the context is irrelevant: "He had a sudden longing for a walk. As he walked there rose in him scraps of music. He was as full of it as a hive of honey: and he laughed aloud at the golden buzzing of his bees. For the most part it was changing music. And lively leaping rhythms, insistent, haunting . . . Much good it is to create and fashion music buried within four walls! There you can only make combinations of subtle, hard, unyielding harmonies . . ."¹ But solitude

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1. *Jean Christophe*, (The Market Place), II, p. 189.

does not come always to Christophe. He has to master life in an antagonistic environment unwilling to accept his greatness as an artist and as a man. He is placed in the midst of the people, the "herd", as Rolland had called them before, who are reluctant to admit a stranger among them.

And Jean Christophe is a stranger wherever he goes. When he walks across the continent of Europe, he is again and again confronted by the same "people". And he is bewildered by their docility and lack of discriminations. Everywhere he finds the same hypocrisy, the same lies. The true instincts of the people are buried deep down, below the ruins of a dying civilization. The Europe he was out to find is breaking to pieces. New hypocrisies and new lies are coming in from outside. France, the heart of Europe, is helplessly watching the decay all around. This is how Christophe looks at the decline of Europe in one of his inspired moments: "The working classes are preparing for war, nations are dying, nations are springing to new life, the Armenians are massacred, Asia, awakening from its sleep of a thousand years, hurls down the Muscovite colossus, the keeper of the keys of Europe; Turkey like Adam, opens its eyes on the light of day; the air is conquered by men; the old earth cracks under our feet and opens; it devours a whole people."<sup>1</sup>

And Romain Rolland, like his hero Christophe, goes on his way to find the hidden greatness of the people.

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1. *Jean Christophe* (The House), II, P. 825

## VI

When Rolland reaches the plains on which the history of modern Europe is being enacted, darkness is descending over the roaring cities and in the villages the shadows lengthen. For the first time he is face to face with the anguish of the multitudes. He had heard them groaning from afar, had listened to their cries of misery and helplessness, and he had lent a sympathetic ear to their suffering. But till now he had felt that the purely instinctual urges of the masses were irrelevant in comparison with the struggles of his heroes. Now that he is among them, he must do more than sympathise or condemn. He knows only too well that the artist loses himself and his vocation, when he tries to lift himself up above the soil that nourished him. Christophe too has his roots deep down among the people. He has all the vigour, the sanity of mind and heart, of the common man. He is lost among the uprooted intellectuals of his generation and he finds that the people also have turned their back to their past and are marching blindfolded towards an uncertain future. The cynicism of the middle-classes, the mental inertia of the labourers and peasants, they are alike intolerable. And now that the shadows lengthen and darkness falls over the land, he can no longer distinguish between the new upstarts and the still slumbering force of the masses: they are all groping in the dark: "And suddenly Christophe thought of it all as of a dead giant lying prone upon the plain. The terror of it clutched at his heart; he stopped to gaze at the gigantic fossils of fabulous race, long since extinct,

that in its life had made the whole earth ring with the tramp of its armies,—the race whose helmet was the dome of the Invalids, whose girdle was the Louvre, the thousand arms of whose cathedrals had clutched at the heavens, who traversed the whole world with the triumphant stride of the Arch of Napoleon under whose heel there now swarmed Lilliput.”<sup>1</sup>

The picture of France is the most fascinating. Rolland gives us a twofold vision of his country: through the eyes of Christophe, the stranger, and of Olivier, the Frenchman. Both the aspects supplement each other. Christophe, on his arrival in France, sees only the external civilization, the France of the foreigner. He looks at it critically, over-critically at times: and he can see below the glittering surface the rottenness within. It is true, at the beginning he only comes in contact with intellectual France, that same “elite” which had hushed up Rolland’s dramas and his biographies, the snobbish aristocracy of intellectual upstarts, the true representatives of commercialised art. His response to this pitiful spectacle of a whole civilization crumbling into dust, is a mixture of pity, despair, and hatred. His attempts to infuse new blood are either ignored or treated with contempt. His clumsiness and angularity make his social life a constant source of public ridicule. And yet he feels within him the strength and energy to upturn the dunghill on which his contemporaries rest in all their complacency and self-satisfaction. One by one he establishes contact with those who claim intellectual

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1. *Jean Christophe (The Market Place)*, II, p. 188.



or artistic leadership in Paris. The result is always the same. Music is "uniformly soft, pale, enervated, anemic, wasting away"; it was the fashion among musicians "to whisper in music"; or they went to the other extreme, "there was no alternative but distinguished somnolence and melodramatic declamation."<sup>1</sup> Literature was in no way better. The number of novels, published at that time, astounded Christophe; to judge by the output, he thought, there must be at least some genuine novels among them. But he found them "all scabrous, all affected, written in a sort of lispish style, a style scented with flowers and fine perfumes—sometimes too fine—sometimes not fine at all—and the eternal stale, warm, sweetish smell."<sup>2</sup> We still remember the "odour of death" of the Parisian stage. It seems to pervade everything, be it the drama, music, or literature. But contemporary politics fares no better. The politicians whom Christophe meets in Paris were men "who in private conversation were sceptics, sensualists, Nihilists, and anarchists" and who in their capacity as leaders of their country "became fanatics" and acted "like Oriental despots." Leading a disorderly life at home, in their offices "they had a mania for ordering everything and let nothing alone: they were sceptical in mind and tyrannical in temper."<sup>3</sup> And we sympathise with Christophe, when he exclaims, "I cannot understand you at all. You live in the most beautiful of countries, are marvelously gifted, are endowed with the highest human sensibilities, and yet you fail to turn these advantages

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1. *Jean Christophe* (The Market Place), II, p. 50.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

to account. You allow yourself to be dominated and to be trampled upon by a handful of rascals. Rouse yourselves; get together; sweep your house clean."

And while pity and hatred were accumulating within him, he gradually also discovered the other face of France: the people themselves, the living tradition of the race. It is indeed like a voyage of discovery, an excursion into the unknown. Partly through casual encounters, especially however through his friendship with Olivier, he penetrates deeper into the lower layers of society, and what he discovers there fills him with great joy. He realizes first of all that "the people have their aristocratic pride, just as the upper classes have their vulgarities" and he found in them "an uncompromising honesty"<sup>1</sup> which he had missed so badly among his intellectual acquaintances. And Olivier tells him "of the brave true hearts . . . men and women who, through a dull, drab life, think grave thoughts, and live in daily sacrifice," he tells him of "the little Church, which has always existed in France—small in numbers, great in spirit, almost unknown, having no untoward or apparent force of action though it is the very force of France, that might which endures in silence, while the so-called elite rots away and springs to life again unceasingly . . ."<sup>2</sup> And Olivier also admits that "France is hardly at all known to the French. The best of us are bound down and held captive to our native soil."<sup>3</sup> The picture of France is complete and the problems raised are many. It almost seems as though Rolland's old conception of the elite had received a rude shock. More mature,

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1. *Jean Christophe*, p. 179.

2. *Ibid.*, (*The House*), II, p. 321.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 323.

more discriminating, he has now to distinguish between the true elite of the people and the false elite of the upstarts. The forerunners, the precursors, always belong to the people. Olivier is one of them, at least in his thoughts. And the France which he visualises, is the France of the future. For the darkness around him is intense. The present has nothing to offer him but death. The very same people whom he so warmly praised, kill him. He is killed in some trivial riot. And he does not even know why he is being killed.

Of Germany also we have a twofold vision, from within and from without. Christophe while living in Germany looks at his fatherland with different eyes than during his stay in Paris or Italy. Nearness only too often blurs the vision; and on the other hand, the influence of Olivier and the Latin clarity of thought, help him to understand his own country better. It is true, on his first arrival in Paris, he does what all foreigners do: he compares his own country with France, applying the same standards of conduct and values to both the countries alike. He sees the cleanliness and neatness of German towns and the disorder and lack of discipline in France. He is struck by the apparent absence of civic sense among Frenchmen, not realising that this lack is more than compensated by individual intelligence and initiative. He only sees the external disorder, not the Latin love for good form and discriminating taste, while in Germany he now only sees the discipline, not the love for obedience for its own sake devoid of all critical intelligence. It takes Christophe a long time to realize the fundamental similarities in the social structure of both the

countries: the upstarts of victory in Germany, the upstarts of defeat in France. The people are hidden below the glittering surface.

And as he has criticised the false intellectual elite in France, so also he ridicules German culture, especially its pompous and pedantic scholarship. This land of "thinkers and poets", of the greatest musicians and philosophers in Europe, is incapable of spontaneous creation. Victory had turned their heads. Having shown the civilised world how to win battles, they will now show them how to think: 'And the great concern of German artists with expression and profundity of thought was, according to Christophe, a good joke. Expression? Thought? Yes, they introduced them into everything—everything impartially. They would have found thought in a skein of wool just as much—neither more nor less—as in a statute of Michel Angelo."<sup>1</sup> The true Germany had been defeated by her own victory. It is dying a slow death, just as the true France. The people of the past remain invisible. There is only the urge for expansion of an ambitious race. Their victory has given nothing to the world but the glittering of swords and scope for the economic oppression of the defeated. And even in his old age Christophe thinks: "The conquests of Louis XIV gave Europe the splendour of French reason. What light has the Germany of Sedan given to the world? The glitter of bayonets? Thought without wings, action without generosity, brutal realism, which has not even the excuse of being the realism of healthy men; force and interest: Mars turned bagman."<sup>2</sup>

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1. *Jean Christophe, (Revolt)*, I, p. 418.

2. *Ibid.*, (*The New Dawn*), III, p. 882.

Perhaps a word should also be said about the Jews. They played a not unimportant part in contemporary French society, and Christophe, almost against his will, came in close touch with them. They were to be found on the staff of the newspapers with the widest circulation, among art connoisseurs and music critics, in politics, in commerce. Christophe met those who were at the top and also those who were at the bottom of the ladder. He brought with him all the prejudices of a mind nurtured on the teutonic ideas of nineteenth-century Germany (Wagner, for instance, was well-known for his antisemitic views), and it took him a long time to unlearn. He could easily see their faults, though he never knew the reason for all the mental and moral twists which characterise the European Jew. Christophe is indeed a child of the Dreyfus affair. And to understand the distinguishing characteristics of the Jews, he had to make an intense effort at emotional re-adjustment. And then he found that, despite all their faults, "they have one great quality—perhaps the greatest of all: they are alive, and human: nothing human is foreign to them and they are interested in every living being . . . They are an active balm in society, and every leaven of life."<sup>1</sup> He also found in them a kindness born of wisdom and the age-long tradition of a tormented race. It was not an active kindness which would readily come to the help of others: rather it was "indulgence, indifference, dislike for hurting anybody, ironic tolerance."<sup>2</sup> And Rolland takes sides in the great fight that had started with the Dreyfus affair over the "Jewish problem".

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1. *Jean-Christophe*, (Antoinette), II, p. 287.

2. *Ibid.*, (The House), II, p. 279.

He never changed sides, not even when this same problem had become one of the main political weapons of political gangsters in the Europe between the two wars. What he had said in his *Jean Christophe* holds good for all times, as far as he is concerned: "If we were so unfortunate as to have the Jews driven from Europe, we should be left so poor in intelligence and power for action that we should be in danger of utter bankruptcy. In France especially, in the present condition of French society, their expulsion would mean a more deadly drain on the blood of the nation than the expulsion of the Protestants in the seventeenth century."<sup>1</sup>

Jean Christophe has reached his goal. It was a long voyage and it led him across war-torn Europe in search of the one and ultimate reality of life: faith in himself and in other human beings. Did he find it? Indeed, the reader is left wondering at the end of the novel. For Christophe's own evolution as an artist had brought him fulfilment, but his contacts with the "people" were fragmentary and frequently led to disappointments and a feeling of pity mixed with contempt. And yet it is in these contacts with the living masses of Europe that the germs of the future can be found. Not Christophe's future, for he is mortal and will not see the wild anarchy of the battlefields of France; he can only sense it from afar. In the riot in which Olivier meets his futile death, he can hear the first stirrings of the leaves before the storm. And as Christophe flees to Switzerland when his own life is threatened and he becomes increasingly involved in

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 383.

the wild fury of the leaderless masses, so also Rolland returns to Switzerland in the summer of 1913, evil forebodings in his mind, and with a plan ready for a new book on similar lines as *Jean Christophe*.

It is there, one year before the outbreak of the war, that he, in the most unpremeditated manner writes his *Colas Breugnon*, Jean Christophe's brother, an artist who rose from the people and whose very being is the past glory of France. Colas Breugnon, however, is a nameless and obscure artist, from Burgundy, the province in which Rolland himself was born. He also fights against fate and wickedness and ignorance. But the tragic conflict is absent. There is always the same broad and cheerful laughter both in victory and defeat. Breugnon represents those anonymous artists who carved the stone figures that adorn French cathedrals, an artist who has never lost his faith, the natural counterpart to the French intelligentsia of Rolland's own time. Breugnon is a free man. He also has his loyalties. But first comes the loyalty towards his own self, that is, towards his own conscience. His sense of humour is not the cynicism of the moderns, their subtle witticisms, their condescending smile, it is the laughter of a man to whom the whole world belongs. He knows of no frontiers, no artificial limitations can be imposed upon him. His struggle is hard, as hard as that of Christophe. But Breugnon's sense of humour and sense of proportion never leave him. And in a language that could best be called elevated prose and that often comes near to poetry, Rolland sketches a life well lived, a well-balanced temperament in which joys and sorrows have an equal share,

and the people of his own homeland. And yet it is a nostalgic novel—a wish-fulfilment. Jean Christophe was a dream in the tragic mood, Colas Breugnon, a dream in the lighter vein. In both the books there is the same nostalgic yearning for the “true people,” those who are at the bottom, and still carry their heads high. Both had a message to give. *Jean Christophe* came in time. And over night Rolland was the best-known novelist in France and abroad. *Colas Breugnon*, however, came too late. The book was in the press to appear during the next summer, that of 1914. It was actually published after the war, in 1919.

The roaring of the cannons found Rolland still in Switzerland. He had known long ago of the threatening conflict. The people, the same who formed “the little Church,” the people who daily sacrifice themselves for their land and the soil on which they live, and also the people who had killed Olivier, will now fight on the battlefields of Europe. The false elite of previous defeats and victories will crumble before the storm. Only the others remain; the forerunners, the precursors of life. But they are few and far between. And sometimes Rolland, in his utter helplessness, feels that there is nobody, that all the elites and all the people, have been engulfed by the rising waves. And he knows now that the continuity of the life of man is no longer a question of the survival of the fittest, but of the survival of the best.





V

## THE WAR

**R**OMAIN ROLLAND was not the only one who had to come down from the ivory tower when the war began. He remained, however, in Switzerland throughout the war, a fact which the average Frenchman could never forgive him. He offered his personal assistance to the Red Cross and for more than eighteen months Rolland sat for six to eight hours a day replying to the anxious letters and telegrams which, from the very first days of the war, went on pouring in from all over the world to the small Red Cross Office at Geneva. It is there that he learnt of the extent of suffering caused by the war. And he realised once more, as he had done in his biographies before, that suffering and human endurance are everywhere the same, that neither language nor frontiers can separate one sufferer from another. It was in Switzerland also that he wrote his two famous books against the war, *Above the Battle* (1915) and *The Precursors* (1919).

Both the books are really collections of articles written during his voluntary exile and published in newspapers, mostly in neutral countries. The first selection includes an open letter to the German writer Gerhart Hauptmann, first published in the *Journal de Genève*, on September 2, 1914; his essay *Above the Battle*, published in the same paper on September 22/23, 1914; an open letter to the Dutch writer Frederic van Eeden, published in *De Amsterdammer*,

on January 24, 1915; an open letter to the *Svenska Dagbladet*, published in April 1915; an article on Jaurès, published in Geneva on the first anniversary of Jaurès' death, August 2, 1915; it also includes a number of messages and articles on the war, especially on what he calls "the murder of the elite". The book was printed in Paris, in 1915, many passages being however deleted by the censor, a full edition came out not much later, during the war, as a supplement to a book in which Rolland is being violently attacked for his internationalist and pacifist views. Strangely enough the censor let the full edition go through the press, and people bought it, not only in France, but everywhere else as well, and soldiers began reading the book on both sides of the front. The second selection is essentially a continuation of the first, but includes more definite views on pacifism and internationalism, one article dedicated to the Russian revolution, published in *Demain*, Geneva, on May 1st, 1917, an article on Tolstoy and an open letter to Maxim Gorki, as well as his open letter to President Wilson and his "Declaration of the Independence of the Mind". In both the books Rolland is intensively preoccupied with the part played by the intellectuals and artists in this gigantic struggle between the peoples of the earth.

To be neutral at that time was a crime. Neutrality for the average man of whatever country, and especially to the average soldier, implied either cowardice or callousness or a conscious betrayal of one's country. Rolland, as we shall see later on, was accused of all these vices alike. But our concern here is not

so much to justify or condemn his attitude towards the war, as to show the evolution of his mind and conscience, as revealed in these two books, in letters and conversations, and in his future writings on the war. It must be remembered that Rolland till then had, like his hero Christophe, kept out of politics more or less successfully. Only recently did he come in touch with the people and had begun writing about them. When the war broke out, Rolland was already forty-eight years old. He knew that the war will mean a revaluation of the universe, not only for him, but for every intelligent and sensitive person in Europe. It is here that his heroes failed him. What would Tolstoy have done, he asks himself, and Beethoven and Michel Angelo and Shakespeare? And what would Christophe have done, the same Christophe who is ready to fight for his country when the war threatens between Germany and France? And he remembers Olivier, that idealist who hated war more than anything else, and whose tragic and futile end is to him a constant reminder of the dangers inherent in a destructive and leaderless mass. He, Rolland himself, will now take up the part that Olivier wished to play: unable to fulfil himself in action, he will speak out what his conscience demands of him, even if it is against the interests of his own country. He also remembers the defeated ones of his early plays, those who despised victory and the vanity of a merely material progress. He will sing the song of defeat, as Olivier had done, and Beethoven, and Saint Louis, and all those nameless ones, "the little Church" of precursors who herald a new day.

His first helplessness is intense. It is almost as intense as at the time of his first letter to Tolstoy. Again he is out to find the spiritual leaders. They alone could have prevented the massacre. But as usual the guiding force is lacking: "It was for this, then, that there had been effected a physical and moral resurrection of the races of the West! It was towards these butcheries that the streams of action and passionate faith had been hastening! None but a Napoleonic genius could have directed these blind impulses to a foreseen and deliberately chosen end. But nowhere in Europe was there any one endowed with the genius for action. It seemed as if the world had singled out the most commonplace among its sons to be governors. The forces of the human spirit were coursing in other channels."<sup>1</sup> Again and again, in these early days of the war, Rolland deplores the absence "of any divine message, any divine spirit, any moral leadership, which might upbuild the city of God . . ."<sup>2</sup> Rolland feels that this leadership can come only from the intellectual elite, provided the elites of all the countries combine in one supreme effort to "save civilization". For Rolland at that time still thought that there was something to be saved. He was not alone in this self-deception. All the countries of the earth were fighting for civilization, and each country had its own conception of what civilization should be like. The vagueness and looseness of thought implied in the statements of almost all the politicians and intellectuals at that time is indeed disconcerting: for it shows an appalling lack of awareness of the issues involved.

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1. Quoted in Stefan Zweig, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

And while the politicians and generals exclaimed that they would "save" civilization by machine-guns and economic exploitation, Rolland also declared that it is the duty of all intellectuals "to save from the deluge the vestiges of the European spirit".<sup>1</sup>

Never, during those war years does Rolland define what he means by this European spirit. Does he mean the spiritual heritage, the intellectual tradition of Europe? But it had been crumbling into dust long before the beginning of the war; Rolland had shown us its ultimate decline in *The Market Place*. Or does he mean the living tradition of the people? But what are his *Jean Christophe* and *Colas Breugnot*, if not the funeral songs to a glory that is past? There was a time when the anonymous and nameless people built the cathedrals that were to beautify the City of God. Now they are no longer creators, they are a "leaderless herd" willingly following the ruling classes to the slaughter-house. Or does Rolland mean the forerunners, the precursors, when he speaks of the European spirit? But they are long ago beyond all salvation. What is immortal in Beethoven or Shakespeare, no machine-guns, no economic exploitation can destroy.

Rolland's preoccupation with the spirit of Europe is indeed a sign of his incurable optimism. Just as Christophe fought his way through all the obstacles, the indifference and hatred of his contemporaries, so also Rolland starts his battle against the callousness and narrow-mindedness of the intellectual elite of today. In this elite, so he thinks, can still be found all the forces of the spirit, and yet "there is not one

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1. Letter to P. J. Jouve, September 1914; published in *Romain Rolland Vingt*.

among the leaders of thought in each country, who does not proclaim that the cause of his people is the cause of God, the cause of liberty and of human progress."<sup>1</sup> None of them are "above the battle". By joining the fight they have betrayed their conscience indeed they have betrayed the European spirit. Rolland's argument throughout the war is based upon the old distinction between the elite and the masses. Everything he had written upto now made this distinction more and more obvious. And the war, for the time being, only strengthens his conviction. In a particularly interesting conversation with a friend in Switzerland, he clarifies his thought once and for all: the war has for ever established the fundamental difference between the elite and the people: "The aberration of universal conscience," he says, "which we have witnessed in the course of this war, is due to democracy or at least to that kind of democracy which we see put into practice. A herd. And all of them are bleating together. In former civilizations they kept silent. Even if you change the political system, there would still remain the same blind and parochial tendencies. The power of the press on them testifies to their lack of individual conscience: and these blind tendencies predominate in an increasing measure.—Would the counterpart be anarchy? Certainly. We are anarchists in the same sense in which all the great minds of the past who show us the way were anarchists. Erasmus, Voltaire, Flaubert, Tolstoy. We oppose it not only to war, but to every blind movement of collective passion . . . Especially so when this pas-

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1. *Above the Battle.*

sion leads towards murder.”<sup>1</sup> It took Rolland a long time to realise the vicious circle in which his thoughts moved at that time. Although he knew very well that all these great minds of the past were deeply rooted in the people, that their aloofness was the result of wisdom rather than of a desire to escape, he still thought of the intellectual elite as a class apart, entirely divorced from the reality of the people. It will take him some time before he becomes aware of the necessity of affirming a new ideal for the people, rather than for the elite. As long as he will consider the people to be a “herd”, he will increasingly be exposed to frustration which comes from unrealized emotions and wish-fulfilment.

## II

Whenever Rolland speaks of Internationalism during these war-years, he means something else than we do today. He first of all applies this word to the elite only, and in particular to the elite of Europe. Having devoted almost thirty years of his life to a close scrutiny to the various manifestations of and the unity underlying the spirit of man, he now wishes to establish this unity in practical life. He knows that he has friends now all over Europe. And in Switzerland a small group of people gather around Rolland, including both Frenchmen and Germans, all of them equally inspired by this new “international of the spirit”. Rolland became their mouthpiece, almost their idol. These are the “finer spirits” of Europe, while all the others who are taking part in the actual battle are traitors to their own cause. These finer spirits have

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1. 1916; quoted in P. J. Jouve, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

two dwelling-places, he says in *Above the Battle*, "one earthly fatherland, and the City of God." In the former we reside as guests, the latter we have to build ourselves. The truly international mind has only one mission to fulfil, to build a "wall" that it may then dominate the injustice and oppression of the nations. The image of the "wall" strikes us as peculiar; for Rolland continues: "Then shall we have a refuge wherein the brotherly and free spirits from out all the world may assemble". The key-word in this sentence is "refuge". Should internationalism be nothing but a refuge, an escape from nationalism and bigotted hatred? And does not Rolland realise that in the not too distant future no wall will be strong enough to withstand the attacks from without, that even internationalism will have to give up its "neutrality"?

For the time being, however, the frontiers of Switzerland constitute the wall which gives them strength. There, in the neutral country *par excellence*, all the malcontents of civilization "those of all nations who refuse to share the prevailing sentiments of national hatred" have found a common meeting-ground. They are united in their common refusal to accept the moral standards of society. They are united by a conscience which is in advance of their time. But the future, so they think, will justify their attitude. "Not for a moment do I doubt the coming unity of the European fellowship."<sup>1</sup> And in order to fortify his conviction of a future unification of Europe, he sends out those famous open letters to the great writers and artists of Europe, imploring them to range themselves on his

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1. Quoted in Stefan Zweig, *op. cit.*, p. 302.



side to help him build the "City of God". First comes Gerhart Hauptmann, the famous German playwright, a socialist and fighter for freedom before the war. Gerhart Hauptmann, we know today, has changed his convictions fairly often, especially in recent times, and he was the least likely person to respond favourably to Rolland's appeal. But Rolland is full of hopes: "I have laboured all my life," he writes, "to bring together the minds of our two nations; and the atrocities of this impious war in which, to the ruin of European civilization, they are involved, will never lead me to soil my spirit with hatred." And he implores him "in the name of Europe" to launch a protest "with the utmost energy" against this crime. Gerhart Hauptmann's reply to this letter is indeed sinister. He defends the right of the stronger and comes to the conclusion that "the weak naturally have recourse to vituperation." The correspondence peters out in mutual misunderstandings. Romain Rolland sends another open letter to Verhaeren, the Belgian poet, enclosing also his protest against the destruction of Louvain and the bombardment of Rheims cathedral. Verhaeren concurs in his protest and writes: "Sadness and hatred overpower me. The latter feeling is new in my experience . . ." And Rolland again implores him to rid himself of hatred. The war, according to him, is like a convulsion of nature; it is no good making any particular individuals or nations responsible for it; and he asks Verhaeren to help him build "an arch as did those who were threatened with the deluge. Thus we can save what is left of humanity." But Verhaeren who comes nearest to Olivier in attitude of

mind among the pre-war European writers, had learned hatred—the hatred of those who suffer, who are not beyond the “wall”, but in the midst of a battle they did not want. “If I hate,” replied Verhaeren, “it is because what I saw, felt and heard, is hateful . . . I am not standing near the fire, but am actually amid the flames, so that I suffer and weep. I can no otherwise.”

But all these refusals and misunderstandings only served to strengthen Rolland's conviction. The “free” and “better” spirits of Europe must find a way towards unity. And silently, behind the “wall”, he continued working for his cause. It is true, already during the war, he became aware of the limitations of his formula. Europe alone will never be able to save “civilization”; at the same time as he came in touch with the thought of Asia, he also realized that even “the greatest European” is on a lower level of awareness than one who embraces in his outlook the whole of humanity. And perhaps his constant disillusionment with the elite, also led him think that the true source of energy is in the people, not in the uprootedness of intellectuals. In his autobiographical sketch *Good-bye to the Past*, he recalls this widening perspective at the end of the war: “I returned to the same thesis of ‘What lies beyond Europe, Panhumanism,’ in an article of 15th May 1918 entitled ‘For the International of the Mind.’ I took much care to explain that I did not mean by that to uphold the cause of a privileged intellectual elite, but the peoples; ‘the international of culture, but not for the privileged classes alone.’” And in this article Rolland also pleaded for “the universal culture, primary education, and a compulsory international

language."<sup>1</sup> But let us remember that this article was written after the Russian Revolution and also after his acquaintance with the East, two events which more than anything else helped him to understand the working of his own conscience.

For the time being, however, Rolland thought long and deeply about the causes of the breakdown. He had seen the clouds gather in his *Jean Christophe*. But he still believed then that the forces of reaction would be overcome. The two great internationals of the mind, Socialism and the Church, had failed to act, when action was most needed. "The two moral powers the weakness of which has been uncovered by this contagious war, are Christianity and Socialism . . . the socialist parties are the great traitors of humanity,"<sup>2</sup> And he remembers Jaurès, the only leader in France who could have prevented the war and whose tragic end coincided with the end of progressive European aspirations. The new international of the mind must be built upon more solid foundations. Independence from national prejudices and party-dogmas are the first requisites. And in Switzerland Rolland comes for the first time in close contact with a different kind of socialism, more active and intolerant, but also more dogmatic: the Russian leaders in exile, Lenin among them. And after a few years of feverish mental activity "behind the wall", the European elite around Rolland will wake up from their dream of a future unity of the European spirit, to find that violent action had swept away much of what they had found intolerable in the past. They had never

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1. Quoted in *I will not Rest*, p. 274.

2. *Above the Battle*.

thought it possible that the precursor could also act. They opened their weary eyes and looked around. And they found that the world had changed since they last saw it. They had been too long above the battle. The great revaluation had begun.

### III

For these intellectuals in Switzerland the revaluation took place, at least at the beginning, on a purely mental level. They had all read their Tolstoy. And they thought they understood the implications of political re-adjustment. The problem of revolution seemed to them synonymous with the problem of violence. Can a revolution be called successful, they asked, which had employed violent means to achieve its object? This question was indeed not without some relevance. It was the question which innumerable intellectuals all over the world began asking after the war.<sup>1</sup> But before any reply could be given, the terms of violence and non-violence required elucidation. According to Rolland, non-violence really consists of two different psychological states which he calls "non-resistance" and "non-aggression". The first is the higher of the two but most difficult to attain. "If I have some doubt," he says in a letter to a friend, "with regard to faith in non-resistance, it is not because I do not find it sublime; but I search in Europe for the souls whom this gown without seam would fit. And to tell the truth, I hardly find any . . . We are such complex souls! We have so many intellectual and moral needs! . . ."<sup>2</sup> In a letter few days

1. For a more detailed discussion of the problem of violence see Chapter VIII.

2. To P. J. Jouve; published in *Romain Rolland Vient*, p. 71 (19/7/1916.)

earlier he had given his reasons why the principle of non-resistance cannot be applied to contemporary Europe; it is useless, he thinks, to preach non-resistance to young and vigorous races; they will not even understand it. "No," he continues, "what one ought to preach to the people is, in my opinion, non-aggression; for they are all ready to understand it. But this non-aggression must be applied sincerely, loyally, and wholly; there exists a kind of sly and underhand daily aggression which puts on the mask of peace and which is the poisoned source of the other."<sup>1</sup> There is also the personal violence which a man might use in self-defence. This, Rolland says, is excusable. But war is no longer a matter of individual enterprise; it is a crime imposed by the various governments on the people. For the people have no quarrel among themselves. "The defence which is imposed upon the people is a sophism of the State. It covers hypocritical aggression. If man is a complex mixture of good and evil, ready for all eventualities, we are forced to accept him as he is. But this is no reason why we should adapt him for organised murder. This is no reason why we should add to the natural evil, a deliberate, calculated,—civilized—evil which is thousand times worse."<sup>2</sup>

But no brooding over the problem of violence will help Rolland solve the problem of action, both social and political. Long ago, while still writing his *Jean Christophe*, he had realised the need for a social and political revolution, and he had—through the mouths of both his heroes—confessed his inability to act. Now

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1. Letter of P. J. Jouve, 16/7/1916; p. 128.

2. Conversation with P. J. Jouve, 1/2/1917; p. 72.

others have acted for him. While he had been discussing the implications of personal or political violence with his friends in Switzerland, others have used violence in order to solve at least some of the material problems of existence. The plane on which they had acted was indeed the material plane, convinced as they were that the end justifies the means. And once more Rolland's conscience revolted: for this had never been the plane of *his* actions. Something had come between him and the other progressive forces of Europe. Not until his discovery of Mahatma Gandhi will this conflict of conscience be solved. The Revolution had exacted "terrible sacrifices"; it had been effected in Russia "in sorrow and in blood". The intellectuals who had been fighting for human decency and "individual conscience" found themselves "helpless in face of the new Sphinx which smashed the present order to save the future."<sup>1</sup> We are not surprised at this feeling of helplessness. It has accompanied Rolland all through his life; it is Olivier's helplessness when confronted by the need for action. But Rolland wants to justify himself. On the plane of action there are, according to him, two kinds of possibilities; either action is violent or non-violent. At this stage he does not yet specify the exact implications of a "non-violent action." He will do so only in his book on Mahatma Gandhi. "It is violence which I condemn," he exclaims during the war, "I condemn it in all the parties. And if anyone can prove that violence is implied in all positive action (which is open to discussion)—in that case, my action is of another kind, is on another plane,

1. *I will not Rest*, (Panorama), p. 16. (For a more detailed discussion of Rolland's attitude towards the Revolution see Chapter VIII.)

that of the Spirit, where violence is an error because it is a negation or a limitation."<sup>1</sup>

Just as he had established an artificial distinction between the intellectual elite and the "herd", the precursors and the people, so now he draws a dividing line between material and spiritual action. Revolutions can be brought about on both planes. But the mental level is higher because it involves the principles of freedom and individual conscience. Thus Rolland develops what might be called an "aristocracy of action", the precursors who through suffering and isolation find their way to action. Already in *Jean Christophe* he had discovered this aristocracy. Their action is their life. Their leadership is established by reason of their moral superiority: "The aristocrats are those creatures whose instincts, and perhaps whose blood, are purer than those of the others: those who know and are conscious of what they are, and must be true to themselves. They are in the minority: but, even when they are forced to live apart, the others know that they are the salt of the earth: and the fact of their existence is a check upon the others, who are forced to model themselves upon them, or to pretend to do so . . . The present anarchy and upheaval of the majority will not change the unvoiced power of the minority."<sup>2</sup> But an "unvoiced" power which cannot express itself will hardly be able to assume leadership when it is most needed. And Rolland, in a truly quixotic attempt to make this voice heard, starts on his campaign for the independence of the mind. The war is coming to a close. And in the sudden silence

1. Letter to P. J. Jouve, 18/5/1917. In *Romain Rolland Vient*, p. 187.

2. *Jean Christophe*, (The Market Place), II, p. 179/80.

we can hear him speak. Although we have heard much of what he says before, we like listening to his voice. It is a human voice. And it floats over the battlefields of Europe, the ruined cathedrals, the up-turned fields. It breaks the silence of death.

#### IV

A "declaration" of a handful of intellectuals, however sincere the appeal and however genuine the motive, must remain ineffective within the framework of contemporary society. There were undoubtedly many who listened when the "elite" spoke as with one voice. For theirs was the only voice in the wilderness.

The "Declaration of the Independence of the Mind" appeared for the first time in print in *L'Humanité*, the very day that peace was signed, on June 26, 1919. As the title of the Declaration implies, it is addressed first and foremost to the brain-workers of the world. And it begins with an indictment of all those workers of the mind who, during the war-years, had deceived both themselves and the people. It is a continuation of the arguments put forward by Romain Rolland in his letters to Gerhart Hauptmann and Verhaeren. "The thinkers and the artists have added to the scourge which is eating into the flesh of Europe an incalculable amount of envenomed hatred . . ." They have tried to justify their hate and thereby they have "degraded thought." Thought to them has become the instrument of the passions and selfish interests of "a clan, a state, a country, or a class." Thought has been broken by war. Now it is the noblest mission of the intellec-



tuals of today to "disentangle Mind from these compromises." Writers and artists must acknowledge the supremacy of Thought over everything else, for "we have no other master." In the uncertainty and turmoil that is going to follow the war, the mind of man must be the rallying point of all men of goodwill. It must reject all passions alike, of whatever party. It is not interested in any particular nation, but in humanity in its entirety. "We acknowledge *the Nation*, unique, universal, the people who suffer, who fight, and who constantly rise to their feet again, and who always advance along a rough road drenched with their blood . . ." Suffering purifies not only the great men of all times, but also the people. But the workers of the mind must lift themselves up above the "blind conflicts", they must build "the Arch of Alliance, the free Mind, one and manifold, eternal".

This declaration can be interpreted in many ways. It is, first of all, significant as part of Rolland's own evolution. He feels that the time is ripe for the best and free spirits on earth to declare their independence from the selfishness of modern politics. He still believes that the conflicts he had witnessed during his own life, were the result of some "blind" force, inevitable like fate itself. Except for the "arch of alliance" between brain workers, he does not suggest any immediate solution for the modern dilemma. He is convinced that the elite of all countries can at least save the treasures of the mind and can work for mutual understanding and co-operation. His whole hope for the future is based on the intellectuals; for he thinks that suffering has purified them, that they are ripe for

leadership. As he accuses nobody in particular, he expects full support for his Declaration.

But this support did not come. The Declaration appeared first in French with several hundred signatures. It was published in Germany in the review *Democratie* (Berlin, 18 July 1919) with about six-hundred more signatures from German intellectuals, and in August 1919 it was reprinted in the *Forum*, Berlin. In England it appeared in *Foreign Affairs* (August 1919), with an introduction by Romain Rolland, in Belgium in *L'Art Libre* (July 1919), and in Italy in *Rassegna Internazionale*. Let us first look at the original signatories. Almost all European countries are represented. The East, however, contributed two names only, Rabindranath Tagore and Ananda Coomaraswamy. France provided the largest quota of signatures, fifty-five, consisting mostly of progressive writers and journalists. Next comes Germany with twenty names, among them the writers Leonard Frank, Hermann Hesse, Heinrich Mann; the philosopher Paul Natrop, and the painter Kate Kollwitz. The United States sent fourteen signatures, including those of Sherwood Anderson and Upton Sinclair. England is represented by only four names in all, Lowes Dickinson, Roger Fry, Bertrand Russell, and Israel Zangwill. Russia also could not send more than four signatures, all of them living outside Russia—we wonder how many would have come from Russia proper, had the governmental blockade been lifted earlier. There are Maxim Gorki and Paul Birukoff, the great friend of Tolstoy, both of them living in Switzerland at that time, on the list. From other countries we find the

great philosopher of Italy, Benedetto Croce, the Swedish writer Selma Lagerlof, the Austrian writer and poet Stefan Zweig, who was then preparing his biography of Romain Rolland.

The list is impressive; even more impressive, if we remember the names not included in it. The absence of writers from England is particularly striking. Romain Rolland only mentions Bernard Shaw who "paradoxical and peevish, maintained that the warriors of the writing desk had acted rightly"; but what about the others, H. G. Wells, Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett, Thomas Hardy, Robert Bridges, to mention only a few? And what about France? The economist Charles Gide is absent, and so are the scientists Dr. Richet and Mme Curie "who could not bring themselves to forget the sinking of the Lusitiana," and Anatole France, whose signature would have carried great weight, but "who, as was his manner, shut himself up smugly in a discreet and padded silence."<sup>1</sup> Their absence is symptomatic of the disunity still prevailing among the intellectuals, of their indifference, aloofness, or complacency. Some of course, might not have signed because they believed that such a Declaration—unless accompanied by deeds—would not serve any useful purpose. Indeed, it did not. For it was followed by a hollow silence, still reverberating with the cries of the agony of the past. These were words, printed in periodicals, which few read and the implications of which even fewer understood. We shall not be wrong if we assume that even some of the signatories themselves were hardly aware of the meaning of such terms as "independence", "alliance",

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1. *I will Not Rest*, (Panorama), p. 86.

"blind conflicts", and so forth. Their signature carried no moral responsibility. They were not required to act. And they represented nobody but themselves. We are not surprised, therefore, to learn that Rolland himself, in 1934, remembers the Declaration and its signatures with a feeling of disillusionment: "In sending out my Declaration of Independence of the mind, I sounded the muster of this army. Written on the 16th March 1919, published in *L'Humanite* on 26th June, with an impressive number of signatures—a number which expanded further in the course of the year, by a few hundreds—it was not long before the Declaration revealed the emptiness and the futility of that army. It was the first, and not the least, of the disappointing experiences for me of which those early post-war years formed the setting."<sup>1</sup>

But let us be fair to Romain Rolland. He indeed realized the issues involved. And the main issues, since his first letter to Tolstoy, has always been the latent conflict and tension between the intellectual elite and the people. Until and unless this problem was solved even the most sincere declaration of faith will carry no weight. Rolland also knows now that the real "arch of alliance" will have to be formed of the intellectuals, on the one side, and the labouring people, on the other. This explains the Commentary to the Declaration which was published as an introduction to the English translation in *Foreign Affairs*, August 1919. It is in this Commentary which came like an afterthought to the original declaration, that Rolland for the first time expresses his conviction—only vaguely hinted at in *Jean Christophe* and *Colas*

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1. *I will Not Rest*, (Panorama), pp. 17-18.

*Breugnon*—that manual workers and brain workers must combine if declarations of faith are to be translated into deeds: "Of all the disastrous effects of this war, one of the most dangerous for the future is the division that has made itself felt and is growing daily between the intellectuals and the world of labour." Rolland has learnt from the numerous refusals to sign his declaration that "the intelligentsia seems desirous of identifying itself with the middle-classes; it has adopted their narrow prejudices, their self-interested conservatism, and is flinging itself into the arms of Reaction for fear of the social changes which would sap its privileges." And just as a tree draws its life not only from the soil, but also from light and air, so also should "the tree of mankind bathe in the great thought which envelops the globe." And many years later—using the same image of the tree, in a letter to Gorki—he says: "It is doomed to die if we do not succeed in transplanting it in the midst of humanity, this 'black earth' represented by the working people."<sup>1</sup>

Most of the writers and artists who had signed the Declaration, did not know that Olivier was dead. They saw from far away the Utopia of the Spirit, the paradise of thinkers and dreamers, "the little Church" of intellectuals in search of eternal truth. But Rolland who had created Olivier, had also destroyed him. One branch of the tree had been broken by the storm. It thirsted for light and air and wanted to reach the sky. And over the broken branch, Rolland sees marching the armies of men, of the sufferers and the oppressed, the armies of the precursors.

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1. "Greetings to Gorki", written in 1931; published in *L. Gazette Littéraire*, Moscow. (*I will Not Rest*, p. 226.)

## THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

**H**OW slow and painful is this process of revaluation! How many obstacles there are on the way to truth! And if indeed conscience makes cowards of us all, then much of the criticism levelled against Rolland during this period of his life seems to be justified. But we know that Rolland was no coward in any sense of the term. Only his conscience made him hesitate when others acted, it made him doubt and ask questions, while others had always a reply ready. It was his conscience which made him see the fever of insanity all-round him, which gave him that prophetic awareness from which there is no escape. Rolland during the war, is like one obsessed by the fixed idea that action on any but the spiritual level means evil and that, on the other hand, there can be no escape from action. He was not alone in his dilemma; it was the dilemma of all the intellectuals of Europe. Only he, less sophisticated than the others, reveals his mind to us and we can see, as though under a microscope, the inner working of his conscience. Everyone of his books or articles, letters or conversations, is a self-confession. And the fact that he freely admits his own weakness, his hesitations and doubts, created him more enemies than friends. Even his old followers in France betrayed him. Except for his small circle of friends in Switzerland and in some other neutral countries, hardly anyone was left whom he could

trust. And when Rolland realized that he was fighting a battle of one against all, his intellectual beliefs hardened into unshakable convictions. The only thing that mattered in future was Truth, and it was well worth sacrificing for it all that was most dear to him, even his own country.

When Rolland, in one of his letters to Tolstoy, had asked him whether he was always happy to possess truth, he indeed touched upon one of the main problems of his own life. For this Frenchman who had voluntarily exiled himself when his country was threatened by war, found that truth—at least on the material plane of life—was seldom beautiful, and hardly ever morally determined. There was, of course, the other truth, spiritual in essence and related to some abstract conception of life which it would be difficult to define. For the truth of the spirit is elusive, only very few can attain it, and then only by rejecting the material plane of life as insufficient. It will take Rolland another ten years before he will integrate the deeper significance of this truth of the spirit in his studies in Indian philosophy and religion. For the time being the struggle continues. And he listens with ever-increasing horror to the voices from the belligerent countries. They have got their own truth which they are out to defend and their own spirit for which they are fighting.

The birth of an organised public opinion in contemporary society is like some unintelligible force of nature, a sudden outburst of the irrational against which the individual writer is powerless. Although we know today a good deal about the mechanism of

public opinion, its formation by the schools and universities, its exploitation by the press, the cinema, and the radio, its manifestations in political parties, popular fashions, hero-worship, and economic boycott, our knowledge of it does not prevent human instincts and emotions from being let loose whenever an occasion requires an organised public opinion. Nothing could be more opposed to each other than the implicit belief of the "herd" in the "truth" of its leaders and Rolland's truth of the spirit born of the struggles of his conscience. For though the ultimate truth to be attained may be one and indivisible, there are many steps to be climbed first, where truth looks both ways—towards matter and towards spirit. And Rolland was not yet on the top of the ladder: he himself hesitated, and his opponents took full advantage of his hesitations. What would be more natural, for instance, than that he who had always written in praise of defeat, should now be attacked by a people sure of their coming to victory. It is a woman, strangely enough, who during the war coined that remarkable phrase: "Romain Rolland is the father of intellectual defeatism".<sup>1</sup> This slogan of "defeatism" was taken up by each and every-one alike. No distinctions were made between spiritual or material defeat. A "defeatist" was one who betrayed his own country. And the question of conscience, according to them, arises only in so far as one's fatherland is involved. The rest is either called "Buddhism" or "Communism" or "Nihilism." No word indeed was strong enough to condemn such an atti-

1. Quoted in Jean Maxe: *L'Anthologie des Défaïstes*. Vol. I, Paris 1925, p.13. This is a collection of articles mostly directed against Rolland and his friends in Switzerland, with a strong anti-communist bias and anti-semitic tendencies. In more recent times most of the contributors to this Anthology have turned fascists.



tude. And we must not forget that the communists in Moscow were also called "defeatist", and nothing was easier than to establish a link between Rolland's group of friends in Switzerland and the Russian exiles working for the coming world revolution in the same country. But some did not even go so far. "Romain Rolland," says one of them, "is a disillusioned, a desperate man. Rousseau and Tolstoy, his masters, still believed in the inherent goodness of man. But he? He is not even a desperate man, for he believes in nothing; he is a dilettante; his attitude remains so unstable, so indeterminate that no definite word can fit him."<sup>1</sup>

None of the critics of Romain Rolland during the war attempted to trace his evolution as a writer or to understand the development of his thought; for them he was first and foremost a deserter of a cause which they considered to be sacred. And as this cause was victory at any cost, any talk about defeat—however spiritual the motive—was liable to be misunderstood. Indeed, some of his most fanatical opponents unknowingly helped Rolland in spreading his ideas. This applies particularly to Henri Massis, one of the intellectual leaders of reactionary France, who attacked in his various books not only Romain Rolland, but also Russia and Germany and the leaders of contemporary India, in short, everything that was in any way opposed to what he calls the "Latin" civilization and to the Roman Catholic Church. His pamphlet "Romain Rolland against France" was published in July 1915. It was—as everything else written at that time against Rolland—offensive and in bad taste. But Rolland

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 79/77.

remembers it with a certain ironic pleasure: "He did me the greatest of services. His clumsy animosity obtained from the French censorship that which it had denied to my friends: the publication of my 'Above the Battle' in full . . ." In a footnote Rolland adds: "Save but one sentence, which was modestly veiled by M. Massis' virtuous hand in order not to offend the chaste eyes of his readers. It was the sentence where I wrung the neck, in advance, of the Tsarist eagle. The modest hand concealed nothing. The neck has been broken." Massis thought he was very clever in getting the book published in full; but actually "he only succeeded in sowing the seeds of my thought far better than all my friends together. After sixteen years, I sent him my ironical thanks for that."<sup>1</sup>

Massis had indeed an old-standing grievance against Rolland. Already before the outbreak of the war he had published a number of essays dealing with Rolland as a writer. One of them bears the significant title: "Romain Rolland or the dilettantism of faith." It was reprinted again, and with a vengeance, after the war. This essay is of considerable interest to those who wish to know more about Rolland's success as a writer in France. For Massis bases most of his arguments on music. Indeed Rolland himself had warned his readers in his *Jean Christophe* of the danger inherent in too great a receptivity to music. Does he not there call music "one of the great modern dissolvents"? And he continues, "its languous warmth, like the heat of a stove, or the enervating air of autumn, excites the senses and destroys the will."<sup>2</sup> This was exactly the

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1. *I will Not Rest*, p. 204/5.

2. (Antoinette), II, p. 247.

argument that suited Rolland's opponents. For does not the "attitude of defeat" imply an utter loss of will, the annihilation of reason in the great dissolvent? And as the average Frenchman is devoid of an understanding of the deeper implications of musical experience, Massis' argument must have found a fairly responsive public in France: "From music his work takes its fluidity. The genius of music is indeed independent of any thought, of any conscious intention; it does not stop at the limitations of space, time or casualty; it seems to apprehend directly the continuous rhythm of life; it has nothing to do with concepts and rejects reason. At the same time it derationalises and de-nationalises: it speaks a primitive and universal language which appeals to the instinct and to the mute and vegetative powers of the soul."<sup>1</sup> Yes, according to Massis, music explains everything: even Rolland's internationalism and his individual conscience. But as a critical argument, it cuts both ways. For there is an inner logic in music to which a musical sensibility has to adapt itself. And this logic is on a higher plane of existence than "reason" or "will". But Massis and his readers were hardly aware of it.

Neither fanaticism nor common-sense will be able to establish a parallel between music and communism. But anything was possible at that time. For if "defeatism" is the result of a "musical" mind, communism, in its turn, is the result of this same "defeatist" attitude. "There was therefore quite a natural development, a logical evolution from this anti-patriotic defeatism to destructive and anti-social Bol-

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1. Henri Massis: *Jugements*, p. 152.

shevism. Birukov, as a matter of fact, the executor of Tolstoy's testament, who 'the Idol' (Romain Rolland) met in 1916, was (according to Rolland) 'the living link between the European minority in Switzerland and . . . the tormented soul of a new Russia. This cannot be forgotten by any one of us.' Which means that very definite relations existed between the colony of deserters and the Bolshevik chiefs then residing in Switzerland: Lenin, Zinoviev, Radek, etc. . . ."<sup>1</sup> And thus the storm broke over Rolland's head. Any calumny was good enough. It was asserted that he was a contributor to German newspapers; that his American agent was a German spy; that he deliberately falsified dates in his articles. Not one of the Parisian newspapers ventured to publish a reply to the charges. A professor triumphantly announced: "This author is no longer read in France." His former friends and associates withdrew into the opposite camp. One of his best friends cancelled at the last moment the publication of a book on Rolland which was already in type. Rolland himself was constantly watched by agents and his essay was publicly stigmatised as "abominable".

The professor who denounced Rolland was one of his former colleagues at the Sorbonne, Aulard. On October 23, 1914, he published an article in *Le Matin*, a leading Parisian daily, dissociating himself from Rolland in the name of the Sorbonne. The next day a number of reactionary newspapers took up Aulard's arguments. In *La Croix*, for instance, we read: "In the *Journal de Geneve*, the Swiss (sic!) Romain

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1. *Anthologie des Defaitistes*, p. 48.

Rolland, who was formerly teaching at the Sorbonne, with a foreign degree (sic!), gently upbraids 'his German friends', while vigorously blaming the Allies for 'shaking the pillars of civilization' by taking the help of Cossacks, Moroccans, the Sudanese, Sikhs, etc. M. Aulard, himself a pacifist at one time, does not hesitate to denounce in the *Matin* the attitude of his monument of impudence who imagines himself a pillar of civilization." At the same time, Rolland's publishers wrote to him that "every day more shops were boycotting *Jean Christophe*, and he adjured me to write an article retracting everything." Not much later, the leading Parisian paper *Le Temps* "added a new charge to the list; it accused me of collaborating with a German organisation called the 'Neues Fatherland,' a 'German engine of war' (it said, manufactured to demoralise France)."<sup>1</sup> Rolland's own comment with regard to this charge is of the greatest interest, if we remember what happened twenty years later: "It was not true. I never belonged to that society, but I had corresponded with some of its members, among whom were Einstein and many others amongst the most remarkable personalities of the new Germany, republicans and Socialists, who prepared for the democratic revolution. These brave men and women who should have been helped by any intelligent French policy have often had to pay for the sincerity of their convictions by undergoing imprisonment and persecution. But the furious Chauvinism of the French governing class does not wish it to be known in France that there is a liberal or revolu-

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1. *Le Temps*, 7 July 1915.

tionary Germany; and they have done everything to stifle it."<sup>1</sup> It is obvious from these few quotations that many of these attacks were part of a deliberate policy of suppressing any kind of free thought during the war,—and no distinctions were made between "defeatism" due to indifference and callousness, and Rolland's conflict of conscience. The difference between the two, so people thought, was one of degree, not of kind.

No wonder, therefore, that Rolland was as intensely disliked in Germany as in France. Indeed German intellectuals were almost unanimous in condemning Rolland's attempt at establishing mutual understanding between the two nations. We read, for instance, in *Die Deutsche Rundschau*, one of the most respectable literary monthlies in peace time, that under the mask of neutrality *Jean Christophe* had been a most dangerous French attack upon the German spirit. What a "nauseating and sacrilegious idea," exclaims the writer of this remarkable essay, "to mix the pure Germanic blood, the noblest on earth, with that of degenerated and decaying races."<sup>2</sup> That fanaticism is contagious can be gathered from the fact that even eminent scholars and writers in Germany were affected by a similar insane hatred. The famous Goethe scholar Friedrich Gundolf, disciple of the greatest modern German poet, Stefan George, is of opinion that "Attila had more to do with *Kultur* than all the Shaws, Maeterlincks and d'Annuncios put together"; and just as Gerhart Hauptmann had told Rolland that the right

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1. *I Will not Rest*, p. 265 (footnote 2.)

2. Carl Toth: *Jean Christophe and German Culture*; In: *Die Deutsche Rundschau*. Berlin, 1 June 1918.

is always with the stronger, so also Gundolf comes to the illuminating conclusion that Germany is the only vigorous country left in Europe, a country which "having the force to create, has also the right to destroy."<sup>1</sup> Thomas Mann who has fortunately retracted his steps in more recent times, does not lag behind Gundolf. In an article "Thought in War-time", in which Rolland was mentioned in the same breath as Bergson, Maeterlinck, Churchill, and others, the old Germanic idea of French decadence, so dear to the average German both of the past and of the present, is reiterated in particularly offensive language: "The brains of those people can no longer put up with war. What has become of this nation is sixty days of war? A people that is thus more and more upset every day by the war, could it still have the right to wage war?"<sup>2</sup> We need not be unduly surprised if Thomas Mann also identifies German militarism with the cause of *Kultur*.

It is not for us to ask whether all this was due to blindness or patriotism or congenial imbecillity. Both Gundolf and Thomas Mann have to be taken seriously as writers. And there is no doubt that they were made, for the time being, the mouthpiece of a deliberate plan of propaganda against the Allied powers. Did they know the implications of their extraordinary statements? We would like to hope that they did not. For, as fate would have it, Gundolf who became Professor of German Literature at Heidelberg University, was also later on Dr. Goebbels' teacher—which,

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1. *Words and Deeds in War*; published in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 11th October 1914.

2. Published in *Neue Rundschau*, November, 14th, 1914.

however, would not have prevented the latter from dismissing him from service because of his Jewish ancestry. Fortunately for Gundolf, he died a few years before Hitler's accession to power. As for Thomas Mann, fate has not been kinder to him. He was one of the first exiles from Hitler's Germany; and he is doing now, twenty years too late, what Rolland did during the last war in Switzerland. Probably the real cause of the present breakdown is that most intellectuals came too late. And even when they came after all, they could never get rid of their condescending attitude, their superciliousness, and their intellectual aloofness.

Less renowned intellectuals were even more outspoken. Their patriotic chauvinism was mixed with wounded vanity and the proverbial German feeling of inferiority. There is for instance, that remarkable magistrate of Rudesheim, Leo Sternberg, who published in Stuttgart a pamphlet full of insults *Down with the mask: A reply to Romain Rolland* in which he accused him of "dishonourable calumny, disgraceful shamelessness" and goes on to say, "Your name will for ever be covered with infamy."<sup>1</sup> Then we hear of a professor in Giessen, Messr, who accused Rolland of conniving "at the prolongation of the war" by publishing the diary of his friend Klein "who, he said (meaning to praise him), had deliberately and publicly supported the violation of Belgium by German arms." Rolland calls this Klein "one of the victims of war." He mentions his diary in his article *War Literature* "with fraternal compassion and I know

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1. Quoted in: *I will Not Rest*, p. 286.



that many of my French readers were moved by it.”<sup>1</sup> This attack by the German professor was promptly published by an international magazine in German Switzerland, whose editor challenged Rolland to deny it. On July 17th, 1915, Rolland replied to all these attacks. It is the reply of an utterly frustrated man. For he realized now that what he was fighting for was beyond the mental grasp of his adversaries: “. . . Every one of my articles has only served to draw abuse upon me from both countries. On either side I have come up against the same stupidity. The abuse did not stop me; but the stupidity has, in the end, disarmed me . . . I retire, wearied and in despair, from a blind battle in which the combatants shed nothing but their passion, and endlessly repeat their own arguments without looking for means to make them progressively accessible to others. I tried to do it for them; I attempted the impossible. I do not regret it, it was my duty to try; but I feel the futility of persisting any longer. I withdraw into art, an inviolate refuge.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed the reactionary elements in both the countries had found a common ground. No, it was not exactly “stupidity”, congenial or otherwise. They did what was expected of them by the national emergency. They exploited Rolland’s success among conscientious objectors, among the proletariat, in progressive intellectual circles, in neutral countries. How easy it was for the Germans to point out certain reviews of *Above the Battle* which appeared in English newspapers. The *Labour Leader* of March 7, 1916, for instance, wrote: “At last, here is the book

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1. *Ibid.*

2. Published in *Internationale Rundschau*, 17th September, 1915.

we have been waiting for!" On March 9th, the reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* exclaimed: "In these golden pages is expressed the best mind of modern France." (H. G. Wells, it may be said in passing, did not understand much of what was happening. In the *Daily Chronicle* of March 17th, he comes to the conclusion that *Above the Battle* is the result of some personal, though obscure, quarrel between Rolland and the literateurs of Paris.) How easy, on the other hand, for the reactionaries in France, to point out Rolland's early success in Russia after the Revolution. Did not Lunatcharsky, in an article entitled "The Third International and the Intellectuals", after having paid his respects to Marx, Engels, Lasalle, and Lenin, salute the representatives of a new Europe, Maxim Gorki, Einstein, Natorp, Forel, Bernard Shaw, Anatole France, Henri Barbusse, and Romain Rolland?<sup>1</sup>

Rolland who was fighting for individual conscience and the independence of the mind, did not understand at that time the ways and by-ways of contemporary politics. Indeed what he had called "stupidity" was a deliberate policy, and his name was used by all parties alike for their own purposes. And he found that their purposes, including at that time those of the Communists in Russia, were unclean. And he withdrew into his shell. For it seemed to him that only in utter isolation can the independence of the mind be maintained. He did not realize then the social implications of this withdrawal from political action. It was defeat worse than any he had ever

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1. See *Bulletin Communiste*, Paris, 26 July 1921, p. 515. •

sustained before. And on the peaceful shores of the Lac Lemman, far away from the din and bustle of neutral Geneva, he writes three more books, two novels and one play. In these books, he thinks, he will once more overcome the evil, ugliness and falsehood in men.

## II

*Liluli*, *Pierre and Luce*, and *Clerambault* are Romain Rolland's contributions to the war-literature of Europe. All three of them were written during the war in Switzerland. The last was completed in Paris in 1920. *Liluli* is a comedy, or rather a satirical farce. It was the immediate result of Rolland's frustration at the "stupidity" around him; its allegory is the symbol of his withdrawal from life and politics. Whatever Rolland had to repress during the war years, his intense desire to build a saner world out of the ruins of the old, to work for co-operation and mutual understanding among the peoples of the earth, and his continuous search for human greatness, was transformed into laughter and satire. But there is bitterness in this laughter; it is the laughter of one who is condemned to die, who knows it and who tries to make the best of life as long as it lasts. The tragedy through which the world was living was the natural counterpart of *Liluli*. *Liluli* herself is a goddess, whose real name is "illusion". It is illusion that makes the two heroes of the comedy wrest on the "bridge of reconciliation", they were friends symbolising the old friendship of Christophe and Olivier, of France and Germany. This symbolism sustains the whole play and is often carried to excess. There is no place for pure lyricism. Rol-

land looks at the world through the eyes of a disillusioned and frustrated man. Diplomacy the intellectuals, the war poets, God Himself, are distorted by his weary and tried mind till they become grotesque caricatures of reality. Satire dissolves everything into empty nothingness.

Gone is the liberating laughter of Colas Breugnon; the optimism of the master-artist of old. This is the bitterest of all of Rolland's works. And we, the readers, feel that it also is the laughter of madness, a wild and hilarious satire of life. The rhythm in which the play advances is jerky, full of unexpected surprises; characters come and go without any obvious purposes; the landscape is confusing and seems to belong to the realm of dream and surrealist art. It is the world seen through a madman's eyes. And if Rolland wished to convey that impression, he indeed succeeded remarkably well. But the thesis is always there, the continuity of his thought never leaves him, even not in moments of deepest dejection. That is why this comedy is such a peculiar and at times distressing mixture of nightmare and intense awareness. For Rolland's conscience never rests. It is there, behind all the madness, waiting as it were, for a more auspicious time. For while writing *Liluli*, he was reading Voltaire, the clearest and most rational of all French writers. Perhaps he felt that the insanity of the world around him, the one he depicted so faithfully in his comedy, might affect him too, and might become an intensely personal problem. Voltaire strengthens his convictions. The freedom of the spirit does exist. It has always existed. The darkening of

the mind of the people will not last for ever. Only it will need many Voltaires this time to bring them back to sanity again. It was then that Rolland began his two novels on the war.

War literature has, in all the countries alike, one thing in common. The individual, be he a civilian or a soldier, is rather roughly pushed back into the social group to which he belongs. His experiences have meaning only in relation to and in connection with the masses. Sometimes the "masses" are the army, sometimes the state. And as the war is an essentially social experience, individuality, personal idiosyncrasies or moods, matter very little. The soldier is anonymous; he has no destiny of his own. Indeed the most successful war novels are those in which the characters—though intensely living and consciously experiencing both joys and sorrows—are submerged in the collective fate of countless other individualities. The perfect soldier in modern literature is one who, while still remaining himself, yet becomes part of a larger unity of suffering and joy. To depict collective suffering requires not only a deep insight into human nature, but also an entirely new technique, an approach to life which can probably best be studied in mediaeval art; for nowhere else can we find the collective aspect of human experiences better expressed than in the literature and art of that dark and essentially anti-individualistic age which produced the gothic style. Many of the symptoms of this "darkness" have come back to us. Obedience and discipline, unquestioning belief in the "cause", mystical leadership and the classless army of the people, they

all belong to the middle-ages; they also belong to our own time. Even conscience is collectively controlled "from above". Only the controlling agencies have changed. The individual who still wants to believe in the independence of the mind is groping in the dark. Those who ask for meaning and significance are liable to deceive themselves. For the meaning and significance of the causes for which they are asked to fight can no longer be rationally determined. They lie on an irrational plane of existence; they are in some way identical with the religious fanaticism of the past ages. The attempt to understand them rationally is bound to fail. For by whatever name the causes might be called, "economic expansion", "democracy", "civilization", and what not, the urge that makes people fight for it, makes them live irrationally and die irrationally for an "ideal" the implications of which a small number only can grasp, is indeed like some unintelligible force of nature which involves everyone alike. All distinctions are abolished. Only from far away can we hear the voices of the drowning, submerged by the waves, and struggling for the "independence" of the mind.

The best novels dealing with the war are those in which these collective urges are depicted. The individual should have a place in them only in so far as he is part of the people; either identifying himself with the cause or protesting against it. But Romain Rolland who still hesitates between the mass-impulses that lead to collective experiences and the individual conscience in isolation, quite naturally chooses the latter as the main subject-matter of his two novels.

Only one element has changed in his approach. While Saint Louis, Beethoven, or Jean Christophe were great souls mastering life because of their inherent greatness, the heroes of these two war novels are taken from among the people themselves, individuals of average sensibility, helplessly struggling against the rising waves. The fact that both the heroes die a violent death is significant. Olivier is reborn again in these war-years, only to die a second time. And still he does not know why he is being killed.

*Pierre and Luce* is the story of two adolescents. It is also the story of Olivier without his friend Christophe. But while Olivier could never fulfil himself in life, Pierre finds fulfilment in love. Love against the dark background of war,—the only creative thing left in a world of destruction and insanity. For before he meets Luce, Pierre still struggles for an understanding of the war, tries to apply rational arguments to phenomena that are not in the least rationally determined. And he, like the writer himself, fails to "understand": "It is nothing to suffer, nothing to die," he thinks, "if one knows the meaning of it. Sacrifice is good if one understands the cause. But what meaning is there in the world and its anguish for an adolescent? In what way can he, if he is sincere and healthy, interest himself in the crude battle of insulted nations who like some foolish rams are fighting above an abyss into which they are all going to fall. And yet the road was large enough for all. Why then this fury of self-destruction? Why these fatherlands full of pride, these states made for plunder, these people whom one teaches to murder as a duty? And

this massacre everywhere among living beings?" Thus Pierre, the over-sensitive child of the French middle-classes asks himself. His conscience is not yet fully awake. But his desire to understand is very great. And as reason fails him again and again, his emotions—long suppressed by the narrow-minded hypocrisy of the society in which he lives—are let loose the very moment he meets for the first time the object of his affections. And against the sinister background of air-raids, bombardments, conscription, and hunger, we can follow these two solitary souls in search of fulfilment.

The symbolism of *Jean Christophe* and *Colas Breugnot* was obvious, at times almost explicit. In the love between Pierre and Luce there is a more subtle symbolism: the thesis never obtrudes itself on the reader's mind as it did so often in Rolland's former books. And yet the reader knows all the time that this intense love, a mixture of naive suffering and childlike joy, in the midst of a city under the shadow of war, is the only creative element left in the lives of these two adolescents. Their love also symbolizes their withdrawal from the social group, their helplessness in the face of collective insanity. It also reflects Rolland's own return to "individual conscience". He has always been attracted by the solitary individual struggling in isolation. And this sweet and tender love serves him as a wish-fulfilment, just as the friendship between Christophe and Olivier had done. It is perhaps strange to find that so many of Rolland's books are mirrors of his own desires and longings, that he gives himself away too easily. This is un-



doubtedly his strength and his weakness as a writer. Strength, because his faith is always crystal-clear before us; he can afford losing himself, when other writers would have chosen a more round-about way. Weakness, because there is bound to be much repetition in the writings of a man as obsessed by this idea of the independence of the mind as Rolland was at that time. But on the spiritual or mental plane very few things "happen". Rolland's characters are remarkable for their inner life, not for their "action". Their attitude towards human existence is a mixture of fear and endless longing. For though they are afraid of the grosser manifestations of life, yet they want to live. The intensity of their craving for life only increases in proportion to their horror of it. That is why Pierre and Luce are killed at the very moment when they achieve the highest degree possible of their love. The bomb that kills them, destroys the "little church", both real and symbolical, they had helped to build, and it kills many others with them. Though their life was spent in solitude, they seem to find their way back in their death to the roots deep down in the earth. Their death is futile, just as Olivier's. They are innocent of all "causes". They are too young yet to think of sacrifice. Theirs is a frustrated end, meaningless, and not to be apprehended by reason.

And when Rolland completed this book in August 1918, he felt that the real novel about the war had still to be written. *Pierre and Luce* was only a lyrical interlude, the anguished cry of a soul in torment. It was not the reflection of a mature intellect when confronted by the war. It was one more picture of the

humility and faith of France, the silent suffering of those who daily sacrifice themselves for their soil without knowing or understanding the reason for their sacrifice. A character had still to be created whose awareness will be so intense, that he will lift himself up above all causes. He still had to create the outcaste of war. It was then that *Clerambault, The Story of a free Conscience during the War* came into being. In this book Rolland collected all the material that is elsewhere dispersed in manifestoes and letters. Again as in *Jean Christophe* it is not the man that matters but the idea which he represents. *Clerambault* is a complete system of philosophy, the history of a conversion, almost an illumination. The original title of the book *One against All* explains the subject-matter: its ultimate significance is freedom, the attainment of self-knowledge raised from the purely mental plane to the plane of action. But the war which *Clerambault* fights takes place in the realm of Thought.

It was obviously Rolland's intention, first of all, to discuss the spiritual accompaniments of war. His concern in this novel was not so much to show the destruction of millions of men, but the destruction of the individual soul. What mattered to him was not the instincts of the masses, the herd willingly following their leaders, but the effort of the individual soul to free itself from the tyranny of collective falsehood. It is the story of the growth of a faith against all prejudices and hypocrisies. *Clerambault* is a commonplace man who at the beginning of the war is easily overcome by hatred and fanaticism and the mediocrities of popular enthusiasm. It takes him a long time

to find the truth. The death of his son, finally, opens his eyes to the reality behind the mask. It is then that he starts his fight. But only greater suffering is in store for him. The higher he climbs, the greater the solitude around him. He is involved in legal proceedings and while the case is still in progress, he meets his fate from the pistol bullet of a fanatic. But Clerambault is by no means a "great soul". He is the average man, the man-in-the-street, a weakling, mediocre in intelligence and power of creation, but who by sheer strength of will can raise himself above the petty quarrels of men. Rolland himself gives us the best definition of Clerambault: "Clerambault became the apostle and martyr of those who refused to bend their spirit to the inevitable of the violence which was being let loose over the whole world, and of those who met with a total and absolute negation all patriotism of race or class, all dictatorship, national or social: the *One Against All*—(its original title)—the free conscience which sacrifices itself to its liberty."<sup>1</sup> And again, as throughout the war years, Rolland analyses the problem of violence, of ends and means. Clerambault, the saint in a modern society, the common man crucified, exclaims: "It is not true that the end justifies the means. The means are even more important for true progress than the end . . ." For it is the means that "shape the mind of man according either to the rhythm of justice or to the rhythm of violence."<sup>2</sup>

One more novel still remains to be discussed, *The Soul Enchanted*, Rolland's *opus magnum* after the last

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1. *I Will Not Rest* p. 22.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

war. It consists of six volumes and we think we can hardly do justice to them within the small space at our disposal. In many respects this novel is a step forward, the final liberation of the soul, the last awareness. Ideologically speaking, Rolland rejects for good all idolatry of the mind divorced from reality. From a political point of view this novel is a continuation of *Jean Christophe* and *Clerambault*, and shows the further development of the individual conscience from pure negation to constructive action. Of particular interest to us is the comment passed on this novel by Carl Radek, in a speech delivered to the Congress of Soviet writers in August 1934, on "Modern Literature and the Task of Proletarian Art." There we read: "We have witnessed not only the conversion of Romain Rolland, but we have also seen how this writer who was led by his conception of the world into an impasse has also led his heroine, in the first volumes of *The Soul Enchanted*, into an impasse—the story is interrupted because he did not know how to continue it—we have seen that this writer has now adopted a different point of view, which ensures to the story its proper historic issue and which in the last volume of his novel carries his heroine right into the struggle. I consider this book of Romain Rolland's as our greatest victory. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

This statement is remarkable from many points of view. It introduces us to an entirely different Romain Rolland, and, to judge by Carl Radek's words, a Rolland full of inconsistencies. For did he not condemn violence in any form, be it the violence of a state, a

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1. *I Will Not Rest*, p. 79.

race, or a class? Did he not say at the end of the last war that the end never justifies the means? Did he not always withdraw from action? And how did it happen then that this writer who for sixty years had been "struggling in the deserts of individualism" had now, in 1934, according to the intelligentsia of Soviet Russia, become her "greatest victory"? Has he not accomplished the almost impossible, the step from individual conscience to collective awareness?

### III

We have seen how during the war-years Rolland's purely individual conception of conscience had taken deeper roots than ever before. *Clerambault* and the *Declaration of the Independence of the Mind* are the neutral results of his insistence on ultimate moral principles in action. The evolution from his first plays to *Clerambault* is evident to anyone who can see behind each subsequent book Rolland's conscience at work. Only once, during the war, does Rolland himself refer to the evolution of his thought during those thirty years of his life. In a conversation with his friend P. J. Jouve, he attempts an analysis of his moral and mental development which is of the utmost significance for our present study: "I realize how much, since *Jean Christophe*, I freed myself. Particularly from the great forces of nature, the great streams of collective passions which dominate and engulf the human souls, streams which I felt within me and which I loved because of their fearful violence,—and which my books, during the first part of my life, constantly opposed to the isolated, effete and materialis-

tic individualism of the age. This lyricism of the great forces is the essence of my Theatre—and also of *Jean Christophe*. Critics have insisted on this characteristic. When I at present re-read these books, I clearly realize that I am elsewhere. Already at the end of *Jean Christophe* I set myself free: the *New Dawn* indicates the turning-point. The freedom of mind became for me more valuable than the irrational forces; I felt the need to oppose the clear power of intelligence to the powers of obscurity however, magnificent they may be. *Colas Breugnot* already indicates the tendency towards this new thought. What I had actually foreseen regarding these collective forces, was correct. From Boulanger, via the Dreyfus affair, to the European war, the evolution of which I speak to you has become more pronounced during the war years. I feel that while still admiring the great collective forces, one also must fight against them—oppose the vast cosmic forces by the pure force of the soul. The evolution from the mind which dominated my earlier works to this new mind seems to me to be the greatest change in my moral outlook.”<sup>1</sup>

His insistence on individual conscience could not, however, carry him far. The Russian revolution, on the one hand, and the Peace-treaty, on the other, clearly indicated that the individual—as long as he remains isolated—cannot act, that his faith is bound to be ineffective if it is not transmitted to the people at large. The elite, therefore, has a very definite mission to fulfil. And its mission of propagating light is the only justification for its existence. Rolland very

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1. Quoted in P. J. Jouve, op. cit., p. 171/73.

well realized this new and inevitable conflict between the faith of the intellectuals and the masses in search of an idol. For while the leaders of thought represent the latent potentialities of a people, both its past and its future, the masses stand for the present only, the forever fleeting moment of their own age. And a few years after the war, Rolland exclaims: "A minority of choice spirits shall always be several centuries ahead of the masses whom they can understand and even love as they should. But the masses will never understand them for what they are."<sup>1</sup> It is the old argument of the precursors, the forerunners, applied to the political life of man. Beethoven, Michel Angelo, Tolstoy, were forerunners as artists. The suffering they had to undergo was inherent in the creative process of their art: it was not (except, perhaps, for the later Tolstoy) the agony of a moral conscience. When Rolland now uses the word "elite", he immediately refers it to the people from which it sprang; and if the aim of all human progress should be—not only the creation of joy and beauty—but also the building of a new and better society, then the intellectuals must become one again with the masses. And what came to him as an after-thought to his "Declaration", is clearly stated again a few years later. It is only now that Rolland's "conversion" takes place. In a reply to the philosopher Louis Rougier who wished to found a cultural review and who fought in the name of the elite whose problems, according to him "should come before the problem of the people", Rolland writes: "To save civilization, to save an elite, is necessary that the despised masses find it to their

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1. Letter to Dilip Kumar Roy, November 1922, published in *Anami*.

interest as well. The best way of working for the elite is still to work for the masses. Its fate depends on theirs. I see the gulf widening every day between the elite and the masses. I have all my life tried to be an intermediary. It has cost me the hostility of the elite. And never has the latter been more disdainfully immured, within the limitations of its caste than in France since the war. The catastrophe is coming..."<sup>1</sup>

But already the progressive intellectuals were divided. One side, and Rolland among them, pleaded for action in the realm of Thought only, the other—mostly belonging to the communist section of the intelligentsia—accused the "rollandists" of aloofness and unjustifiable detachment. Thought alone, they said, will solve nothing at all. Perhaps they also remembered Rolland's refusal in 1917 to accompany Lenin to Russia. This is how Rolland justified his conduct at that time: "I was not a man of action, I was a man of thought, and I considered that my proper duty was to endeavour to maintain the thought of Europe clean and pure, just and free, independent of every party. Lenin would have liked in March 1917, to have taken me along with him to Russia, and Guilbeaux conveyed his message to me, but I refused."<sup>2</sup> What good does this personal faith of Rolland serve, asked his opponents, if it refuses to be translated into deeds? What good, indeed does it serve if it is only "torn by the sufferings of the world" and does nothing to alleviate them. However pure the thought, however sincere the faith, their ultimate test lies in action. And has not Rolland himself said

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1. 14th November 1924. (*I Will Not Rest*, p. 36.)

2. *I Will Not Rest*, 275.



that "a thought which is not active would be a thought which did not think—immobility—death . . . That alone is alive which acts."<sup>1</sup> Have not all his books glorified action, and especially the action of the precursors? It almost seems as though we find here an inconsistency in Rolland's thought. Actually this apparent inconsistency is based upon Rolland's different conception of "action" at different periods of his life. At times he speaks of the influence of his idols on him, Saint Louis or Tolstoy or Beethoven, whose life or work "inspires one to action"; at times, especially during the war, he means the action of the thinker which consists in propagating truth among the misguided people; in his books on India, he speaks of social action born of a deeply religious faith; and only much later, in the last decade of his life, will he include definite political action among the various manifestations of thought. The first two possibilities seem to be exhausted at present. The individual is no longer alone. He sees, stretching to the furthest horizon the people to whom he belongs. And Rolland leaves the smallness of Europe, that weary and exhausted continent, on which new armies were getting ready for a new slaughter, and crosses the sea to a new land not altogether unknown to him and where his voice had already been heard before. He came as a precursor of European thought. He came to build the Arch of Alliance.

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1. Letter to Eugene Relgis on the duties of the intellectuals and International conference of intellectual and manual workers. 20 Oct. 1930.

## THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE EAST

**I**T would require a book by itself to analyse the peculiar attraction of the East for western intellectuals, especially during the last hundred and fifty years. From the Schlegel brothers at the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, we find a forever increasing number of philosophers, poets, novelists, playwrights, and even musicians whose main inspiration was of oriental origin and who incorporated Eastern thought and conceptions of life into their creation. Everyone of them, it appears, discovered the East in his own individual way: frequently the first acquaintance was casual and without any deeper implications; in some cases this same first acquaintance led to a sudden illumination or a new creative urge which lasted all through life. Others again had to labour hard in order to extract from the East the wisdom they were out to find. And lastly there were those who found the East by accident, as it were, and for whom Asia was never anything more but a stimulating intellectual adventure. But whether casual or profound, an acquaintance with the East had become in Europe one of the first requisites of a broadminded outlook on life and no serious writer could avoid, at one time or another, to take up an attitude to or to evaluate the East in his own way. Indeed there are as many attitudes towards the Orient as there are writers in the West. For everyone's attitude was determined in advance by his intellectual pre-occupations, his out-

look on life, his religion, the maturity of his moral conscience, and, not least of all, his former creations. For Voltaire India was an exciting adventure, while for Shelley it was a metaphysical universe; for Schopenhauer it provided the main argument for his pessimistic view of life, while Goethe found in Sakuntala the lyricism of nature in all its virgin purity; for Tolstoy India represented the lost Christianity of love reborn again, while Aldous Huxley sees in it the perfect wisdom of non-attachment.

At all times, however, the East was the easiest way of escape from the European urge for action. Those among the intellectual elite who felt that positive action always leads to evil and to violence, tried to find in Eastern philosophy and religion a substitute for their own disappointed hopes. The failure of Christianity, on the other hand, to provide the West with moral standards of action, contributed not a little to this "Eastern Renaissance" in Europe. It is significant that Tolstoy, Rolland's master, turned towards India in his old age, hoping to find there a solution from the dilemma in which he found himself, the dilemma of the intellectual who wants to translate his thoughts into practice and who is constantly confronted by the violence of all but the most non-attached actions. Rolland, quite naturally knew of Tolstoy's "conversion" in his old age. The religious implications of Tolstoy's writings on the East were obvious. Indeed religion, and especially Tolstoy's dissatisfaction with Christianity, seems to have led Tolstoy to the East, and especially to India and Buddhism. On the other hand, Tolstoy's pre-occupation with non-violence as a

political weapon, made him look towards India and, during the last years of his life, towards Mahatma Gandhi, hoping that his own ideals may be put into practice, if not in Europe, at least in the East.

It is exceedingly difficult to trace the development of Rolland's Indian thought. The few biographical notes available give us a very sketchy view of Rolland's early attitude towards the East. Mere facts and data are not sufficient for our present purpose. We are here concerned with Rolland's evolution as a writer and thinker, and we shall have to place his evaluation of the East within the framework of his mental evolution. We have already followed Rolland across fifty years of his life and we have found certain characteristic elements in his thought which provide us with a starting-point for an analysis of his approach to India. Indeed Rolland was both by temperament and upbringing particularly fitted to become an exponent of Indian thought in the West. His constant pre-occupation with the problem of defeat and spiritual awareness was closely akin to the religious ideas of ancient India; his emphasis on the part played by the precursors in the history of humanity made him quite naturally look for similar instances of greatness in Asia. His recent adoption of an internationalism which would embrace all the nations of the earth—and particularly their greatest intellectual representatives—led him to scrutinize those manifestations of the human mind which were of a universal appeal. In addition, there is always that inborn desire in him to look beyond the frontiers of France, and even of Europe, for collaborators in the task of rebuilding—

or at least of saving—civilization. That is why he had first written to Tolstoy, and had later on found in the Germany of Beethoven, in the Italy of Michel Angelo, and the England of Shakespeare, the spiritual counterparts of his own sufferings and joys. His discovery of India was inevitable—he only had to follow his own inner *logos*, the spiritual urge that drove him from country to country, to find rest in the continent in which many before him had found rest. And that it took him such a long time to discover what, after all, was before his eyes all through his life, is also quite in the nature of things. Only after having “discovered” his own country, and then her neighbours, and lastly the whole of Europe, could he begin his exploration of the East. But while many before him had lost sight of Europe the very moment they were face to face with the shores of India, he looked at this continent with the eyes of one who no longer made any distinctions between the narrow traditions of one country and another, but who had long ago realized the fundamental similarities of human experiences, of human greatness and also of human mediocrity. In discovering India, he also re-discovered a lost Europe. Indeed to him India was a wish-fulfilment born of intense anguish, his life-long dream come true.

Some of Rolland's earliest reference to India occur in *Jean Christophe*, especially in the second part. That is not surprising. *Christophe*, by temperament and cultural heritage, was a European through and through. As a musician he represents the whole of the musical traditions of the West. We can assume that, had he been acquainted with Eastern, and espe-

cially Indian music, he would have found it as intolerable as those exotic and un-European musical experiments of contemporary Paris. It is also significant that he never cares to study non-Western musical traditions and never even mentions the possibility that musical systems might exist outside Europe. He has all the vitality and expansive urge for action of a "good European," the kind of person Rolland himself wanted to be at that time. Olivier, we know, is different. Sensitive to the extreme to outside influences, always open to new intellectual experiments, he very soon realizes that there is a world beyond the frontiers of Europe, a world dark and savage and full of evil forebodings for the West. The East—and he never specifies exactly what he means by it—symbolizes a new and mysterious force ready to fall upon weary Europe and to devour the last vestiges of the European mind. Not that Olivier is a pessimist; only his awareness, as usual, becomes conscious of fundamental issues long before the average European could grasp the implications of a "rising" East. And Christophe, in whom there is so much of the common man, the man of the people, violently rejects Olivier's thesis that the West is doomed: there is enough vitality in him to rejuvenate, if need be, not only Paris and the whole of France, but Europe herself: "The West is burning away," says Olivier, "Soon . . . Very soon . . . I see other stars arising in the furthest depths of the East." And Christophe exclaims "Bother the East! The West has not said its last word yet. Do you think I am going to abdicate? I have enough to say to keep you going for centuries."<sup>1</sup> But Olivier is not

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1. *Jean Christophe*, II, p. 408.

content with vague feelings of impending doom. He studies Eastern philosophies and religion. They open his eyes to the futility of all action not rooted in detachment and divine indifference to earthly gains. Indeed Olivier seems, in some respect, to reach certain conclusions about the ultimate significance of all action, not dissimilar from the conclusions reached in recent times by Aldous Huxley. How "divided" Rolland's mind still was when he wrote *Jean Christophe* is clearly shown in the following conversation between the two friends. Rolland still remembers his own youth, his fight against the evil of "nothingness", against the belief that all action is futile, a fight of which he spoke in one of his letters to Tolstoy. In his later criticism of Tolstoy we also remember his attacks against the complete non-attachment, the "Nirvana" of the ageing writer of Russia. And he puts very similar words into Christophe's mouth, his own conviction that only action can save mankind; purposeful and significant action, that is, creation in all the domains of life: "All your sentiments of renunciation are only the covering of the same Buddhist Nirvana. Only action is living, even when it brings death. In this world we can only choose between the devouring flame and night. In spite of the sad sweetness of dreams in the hour of twilight I have no desire for that peace which is the forerunner of death. The silence of infinite space terrifies me . . ." Olivier's reply is surprising: for he refers him immediately to the "barbarous past", meaning thereby the past of Asia, and he takes down a book from the shelf and begins to read a passage from the *Gita*, the "sublime

apostrophe of the God Krishna": "Arise, and fight with a resolute heart. Setting no store by pleasure or pain, or gain or loss, or victory or defeat, fight with all thy might . . ." Christophe is overjoyed. He snatches the book from Olivier's hand and continues reading: " . . . I have nothing in the world to bid me toil: there is nothing that is not mine: and yet I cease not from my labour. If I did not act, without a truce and without relief, setting an example for men to follow, all men would perish. If for a moment I were to cease from my labours, I should plunge the world in chaos, and I should be the destroyer of life."<sup>1</sup> The conversation, however, does not end in a compromise. The question as to who is right is left open. Rolland himself did not know it then.

We learn from various casual remarks made both by Rolland himself and by a few of his biographers that his interest in the East increased with the gradual deterioration of the European mind during the war. But even during the war Rolland did not make any systematic attempt to familiarise himself with Indian life and thought. His contacts were of a haphazard nature, and would hardly be worth mentioning here, had they not led him finally to a systematic exposition of Indian philosophy and religion a few years later. Many of his intellectual activities in Switzerland during the war were the result of his desire to escape from the horror of Europe. And in a footnote he writes: "Other refuges of art and thought were revealed to me at that time. India, which was to renew my life, and the first electric shock from which

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1. *Jean Christophe*, II, p. 458.



was accidentally given by the acquaintance I made this winter with the books of Anand Coomaraswamy (*The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon*) . . ."<sup>1</sup> P. J. Jouve, in his book on Rolland, mentions—again in a footnote—the vast number of books on the East read by Rolland in Switzerland. Even before he became acquainted with Rabindranath Tagore's famous lecture in Japan, in 1916, (*The Message of India to Japan*), Rolland looked in Asia for new elements of thought which might revitalise Europe. He himself (with the help of his sister) translated extracts from Tagore's lecture and published them in the form of an appendix to one of his anti-war pamphlets. Tagore himself was quite unaware at that time of the interest Rolland took in him. Only in 1919 Rolland wrote his first letter to Tagore, enclosing the "Declaration of the Independence of the Mind" which he requested Tagore to sign. It is the beginning of a friendship which lasted till Tagore's death in 1941.<sup>2</sup> But there is no doubt that Tagore's lectures in Japan further stimulated Rolland's interest in Eastern thought.

In 1918 Rolland's emphasis on India as the spiritual counterpart of Europe becomes more pronounced. In a letter written to one of his young friends early in 1918 he speaks of the "mysteries" of the East as opposed to the cold and calculating logic of the West. Unfortunately this letter itself is not available; but we can gather a good deal from the young man's reply. To judge by this reply Rolland's first interest in India was not purely political—as some seem to

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1. *I Will not Rest*, p. 201.

2. The full correspondence between Rolland and Tagore will be found in a publication of the *Vivra-Bharati*, Calcutta, 1948.

think—but was strongly coloured by his spiritual preoccupations at that time: "I understand your disgust with Paris. It is a vulgar, restless, enervating town. Sometimes during these unending grey winters when the streets are more dirty and the inhabitants more stupid, I am devoured by mad nostalgic yearnings for far-away countries, other civilizations, more primitive and true, and more solid also, ancient like the temples of India, sunk in the cradle of time. Oh, how I understand that you are attracted by the mysterious Orient, so near perhaps to us, despite its hidden treasures, in any case more satisfactory for those who dream of eternity than the shallow groping of Europe! You know, I would like to accompany you, if you go, and if you want me to. One has to be free and strong! Does not the joy of conquering the world give us freedom and strength? One becomes richer by every new discovery."<sup>1</sup> But Rolland is not yet ready to sacrifice his European conception of life to the complete non-attachment of the East. All through the war years he considers East and West as opposite poles of humanity. Europe, like a boat tossing in the storm, will have to choose either of the two. And gradually it dawns upon him that Europe will not even be given a chance to choose. He can see now only the weariness of frustration, the utter loss of will-power and self-determination, not Europe, but other and stronger forces will decide her fate. Only a Napoleon could save Europe: "Out of this battle of the nations two colossal powers will emerge, one facing the other: America and Asia. Europe will be

1. Letters of Jean de Saint-Prix to Romain Rolland (1917-1918); published by K. Hiedes et Co., Paris, 1924, p. 47; 3rd January 1918.

engulfed by either of them . . . I am no prophet and nobody can say which of the two currents will engulf Europe. But I believe that the salvation of humanity, the hope of its future unity, resides in the latter."<sup>1</sup>

If Asia is the only hope, Rolland's own contribution to the salvation of European civilization must be to trace in the Asia of today those progressive elements which would help him to build that Arch of Alliance between intellectuals which was his main pre-occupation during the war-years. And if we remember that his interest in things Eastern coincided with his growing doubts as regards the sincerity of the European elite, we shall understand the reason why Rolland was out to find master-minds, forerunners, rather than "the people" in the East. We may even go so far as to say that Rolland knew little or nothing at all at that time about the Indian masses (he has never set foot on Indian soil), or that, whatever fragmentary knowledge he possessed, was irrelevant to his present purpose. Already in his *Precursors* he pleads for the International of the Mind embracing the intellectual elite of both Europe and Asia: "I would like that this intellectual union should not be limited to the European peninsula, but that it should spread to Asia, the two Americas, and to the great islands of civilizations all over the world. One has to look towards Russia—her large doors wide open to the East—in order to receive the new breath in all the realms of thought full in the face." But the International of the Spirit was only a beginning. For Rolland at this time the step from intellectual union to political union was a

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1. Open letter to the Italian newspaper 'Avanti', publ. October 1918.

short one. He realized soon enough that no intellectual co-operation would be possible without at least a minimum of political agreement. And with the passing of time the dream of an Arch of Alliance between East and West also broke to pieces. For however willing intellectuals were to work hand in hand for a better world, the political and economic obstacles were beyond the possibility of an immediate adjustment. Two years after the publication of his essay on Mahatma Gandhi, Rolland comes back to his old thesis of the incompatibility of spiritual union without political union. From now on these two pre-occupations will go hand in hand. For spiritual freedom necessarily also implies political freedom: "I was occupying myself with my new task of trying to avert the gigantic conflict the menacing signs of which I saw, not perhaps without a certain excess of obsession, accumulate threateningly, between Europe and Asia, and to organise in opposition to it a world union of men of culture from every country against the common enemy—the nationalist barbarism spread all over the globe."<sup>1</sup> But before he could reach that final conclusion, that ultimate synthesis of mind and matter, he had first to discover the miracle of a modern Mahatma, the political leader whose spirit had taken root deep down in the tradition of the people, the defeated Saint Louis and his vanquished people come back to life again.

## II

That Rolland should become acquainted with Mahatma Gandhi's work and message was indeed

1. Reply, dated 20th May 1925, to an Inquiry about International culture. Publ. in *J Will not Rest*, p. 85.

inevitable. And yet it was again in a casual conversation that the name of Gandhi was first mentioned to him. It was at Schoeneck, in August 1920, that his friend Dilip Kumar Roy first spoke to him about Gandhi. In the course of the next few years he heard more about him, first from Rabindranath Tagore, during his visit to Paris in April 1921, and later on from Dr. Kalidas Nag, in April 1922. There is no doubt that from the very beginning Rolland felt strongly attracted to Mahatma Gandhi's personality. Very shortly after, the publisher Ganesan of Madras, sent Rolland the proofs of a collection of English articles by Gandhi, *Young India*, and requested him to write an introduction for them. Rolland's letter of refusal to Ganesan throws an interesting light on his divided mind at that time. Much later he tried to justify this refusal in the following words: "Not finding myself sufficiently in agreement with the political thought of Gandhi, I refused, on the 20th August, 1922. As I wrote to Ganesan, I saw in Gandhi (what he really was, at that time) an 'idealist-nationalist'—'the highest and purest type, almost unique today, of spiritual nationalism.' But I meant to maintain as against him, my position as an internationalist. I added that it was not my habit to pass a hasty judgment on such a massive system of thought and action. I would wait until I had studied it maturely and in absolute freedom."<sup>1</sup>

The following winter of 1922-23, Rolland spent in reading, with the help of his sister, these articles of Mahatma Gandhi. Already in February 1923 appeared his "Essay on Gandhi" in the review "Europe" which

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1. *I Will not Rest*, pp. 68-9.

had just then been started, and in December of the same year it was published in bookform. In July 1924 it was followed by the publication of the French translation of Gandhi's *Young India* to which Rolland contributed a preface. In the meantime Rolland had sent him his book with a request to correct all the mistakes, and Gandhi who had just then been released from prison, writes to him, from Andheri, on March 22, 1924, as follows: "I thank you for your kind letter. What does it matter if you have, here and there, made a few mistakes in your essay? To me the wonder is that you have made so few, and that you have succeeded, though living in a distant and different atmosphere, in interpreting my ideas so correctly. It shows once again the essential unity of human nature although it may be flowering under different skies . . ."<sup>1</sup>

This was the beginning of a long and lasting friendship. Rolland's admiration for Gandhi was indeed undivided, and was based, more than anything else, on that synthesis of faith and action, which he himself had always wanted—and could not—achieve. We know very little about Gandhi's attitude to Rolland. Mahatma Gandhi never perhaps felt quite comfortable among men of letters who write and think much, but act little. The reply he wrote to the editor of Romain Rolland's birthday-book, in 1926, is, in that respect, most illuminating. He indeed hesitated for a long time before replying at all. "My difficulty," he confesses, "was my unfitness to find myself among those men of letters whose contributions you have invited. This is no mock modesty, but my inmost feeling." But the

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1. Publ. in *I Will Not Rest*, p. 77.

other reason why he hesitated, has probably astonished many a reader. "I am unfit also," Gandhi continues, "because, I confess, I knew practically nothing about our good friend before he imposed upon himself the task of becoming my self-chosen advertiser. And you will be perhaps amazed to know that now too, my acquaintance with him is confined to a very cursory glance at that booklet regarding myself. The work before me leaves me no time to read the things I would like to. I have, therefore, even now, not been able to read any of his great works."<sup>1</sup>

We are concerned here only with Rolland's attitude towards Gandhi. Let us remember that he first heard of him at the time of writing his *Clerambault*. Clerambault was a purely fictitious character, but the coincidence cannot be merely accidental. And while Rolland was attempting to depict the life of a man, a common average man, whose faith is strong enough to resist all influences from outside and who is able to translate this faith into action, he discovered Gandhi, who succeeded where Clerambault had failed. And in these dark and pessimistic post-war years, he found a new certainty: "Gandhi's vindication of the 'still small voice' was akin to that in my *Clerambault*. He sealed it with the seal of a life which, through its example of sacrifice, carried along a whole nation in its wake."<sup>2</sup> When faith and action no longer coincide, there is reason to doubt the efficacy of faith. But action must be selfless, if it implies sacrifice. Pacifism as a mere creed is no longer satisfying, for "we feel that they are hesitating, that they speak of a faith they

1. Romain Rolland Birthday-Book, Published by Rotapfel-Verlag, Zurich, 1926, p. 185.

2. *I will not Rest*, p. 89.

themselves are not sure of. Who will prove to them the existence and efficacy of this faith? And how can it be proved, in the midst of this world which denies it, in the only manner in which every faith can be proved and justified? In action! . . . here then is the *Message of the world*, the message of India through the mouth of its Messiah: 'Let us sacrifice ourselves!'"<sup>1</sup>

And just as in his previous books Rolland had compared the precursors of the past, the leaders of the French revolution, for instance, with contemporary politicians, he also first applies the common standards of modern politics to Mahatma Gandhi. And he finds that they do not fit him. Even compared to European revolutionaries—and Rolland at that time also includes the revolutionaries in the Russia of 1917—he seems to stand on an infinitely higher level of awareness. For "Gandhi is not, like our European revolutionaries, a mere maker of laws and decrees. He is the creator of a new humanity."<sup>2</sup> And in Gandhi also, Rolland sees a precursor who, though in advance of his time, yet never denied his people. Being their leader he is part of them. For as Rolland had said in his early plays thirty years ago: in humility and defeat all are equal. He find on his face "no sign of triumph", in his heart "no sign of vanity". And he adds: "He is and remains a man like all other men."<sup>3</sup>

The most fascinating thing in Rolland's thought is its continuity, how across all obstacles and inconsistencies he always found his way back to the source from which his thought sprang. His constant endea-

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1. *Mahatma Gandhi*, Ganesan, Madras, 1923, p. 133.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 76.



your to establish unity in a world in which the senses perceive nothing but diversity; his repeated attempts to relate different manifestations of thought to some fundamental reality which is beyond the scope of our senses; the continuous repetition of names and events,—Beethoven and Napoleon, Danton and the French Revolution, Tolstoy and Non-resistance,—the world of his thought seems to move in a circle for ever expanding in time and space, instead of in a straight line. His beginning is also his end—and in between there is the struggle within, a struggle for synthesis and harmony, and out of every conflict springs a new awareness. Indeed, a musician's mind quite naturally moves in a circle: for the first note gives the key to the whole piece, and however great the disharmony in the middle, it will end in the same key and with the same note. The key of Rolland's life was given by Tolstoy. In his letters to him we can trace the subtle modulations of the tune: it will never leave him again. And though the key changed at times and new tunes and melodies were introduced, they all served only the purpose of underlining, as it were, the significance of the first. And however much he criticised Tolstoy in his later life, Rolland always came back to him, if for nothing else, at least for the most convenient standard of comparison. For as every new tune stands in some relation or other to the preceding ones, so also every new discovery in Rolland's life refers, although at times unconsciously, to his first great experience in the realm of thought.

Nothing, therefore, was more natural than a comparison between Mahatma Gandhi and Tolstoy. In-

deed it almost seems as though in Gandhi's personality and work both Tolstoy and Rolland meet. They both looked upon him as a symbol of a new faith which he alone among men had put into practice. On the other hand, Rolland's letters to Tolstoy had been written only a few years before the beginning of the correspondence between Tolstoy and Gandhi. And it was the young Gandhi—just as Rolland a few years previously—who had first written to Tolstoy. Tolstoy, therefore, provided Rolland with a standard of comparison by means of which he could measure Gandhi's greatness. And we are not surprised to hear that where Tolstoy had failed, Gandhi had succeeded: "This is indeed a more tender Tolstoy, more easily satisfied, and, if I may say so, more 'naturally' Christian (in the universal sense) than the Russian: for the latter is a Christian less by nature than by wish."<sup>1</sup> Not only is Gandhi more 'Christian' than Tolstoy, he also lacks that split in the personality which is the common characteristic of all contemporary European intellectuals. His is a unified sensibility, and everything in him is "natural, simple, modest, and pure: whereas in Tolstoy, pride fights against anger, everything is violent, not excepting even non-violence."<sup>2</sup> The tune is the same. Only its significance has changed. It began as a searching in the dark, a question not sure yet of its implications, tumultuous and confused as youth itself. It has gained in maturity. Mahatma Gandhi's message is the reply to Rolland's first letter to Tolstoy. And as one melody replies to another in a never-ending

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1. *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 25.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

musical dialogue, until in the end they reach the ultimate harmony for which they had been originally created, so also does Rolland now attain the maturity of his faith: his conscience is no longer a melody restlessly wandering in the realm of contradictory thought, it is like the concord of many sounds and many instruments in an ultimate attempt at harmony.

The harmony would have been even more perfect, if Mahatma Gandhi would have been not only a "man of faith" and a "man of action", but also a "man of letters". Gandhi's dislike (at the time) for material progress and a scientific outlook on life, fills Rolland with some misgivings. How can human progress be symbolized by the spinning-wheel; and should this great and unique faith which could, have moved mountains only move a wheel? Even the most sincere well-wisher in Europe at that time must have had his doubts with regard to Gandhi's social and economic ideas. Indeed, Rolland revolts against "this mediaeval faith" which, he says, "runs the risk of coming into clash with the volcanic movement of the human spirit and being shattered to pieces."<sup>1</sup> Not that Rolland uses the word "mediaeval" in any pejorative sense. It is "mediaeval" in the same way as all collective streams of faith can be called so, those very "streams" which have provided him with subject-matter for some of his earliest plays. But we also remember what Rolland had said about his own evolution a few years ago in Switzerland: did he not emphasize there that the streams of faith, the mysterious collective forces in mankind, seem to him of

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

less significance than the individual conscience? For after the war Rolland had again and again made the distinction between collective and individual faith, the former being the impetus that drives the masses to action, the latter being the moral essence of the free and strong souls, the creators and precursors. No one expresses better this collective stream of faith in India than Mahatma Gandhi; he, the Saint Loius of the East, leads his people to defeat; he is carried along on the stream of faith; he is the crest of the wave. And soon Rolland finds Mahatma Gandhi's counterpart. For as Christophe needed a friend to become perfect, so also Mahatma Gandhi requires an Olivier: for only both of them together will reach fulfilment.

It is one of the miracles of human history that one century should have produced two giants of faith and action in one and the same country, two men who were friends although they, according to Rolland, represent almost two contradictory aspects of humanity. For while Mahatma Gandhi is the universal stream of faith incarnate, Rolland discovers in Tagore the free soul, the individual conscience. These two personalities are like the thesis and anti-thesis of life both contradicting and supplementing each other. The fact that, in his book on Mahatma Gandhi, Rolland takes sides and chooses the "free soul" as opposed to the stream of faith, is the result of his sufferings during the war-years, his conviction that the faith of the masses is blind and unconscious and can easily be led to destruction and even self-annihilation. And when Tagore, in 1921, "felt suffocated by the blind belief and obedience of the followers of the faith of

the master", Rolland sees in Tagore's doubts and fears the individual conscience at work: "We know this anguish and this protest. They belong to all times. The last noble souls of the expiring antique world gave vent to the same feelings in the face of the Christian faith which gradually asserted its sway. We ourselves feel that such a sentiment of opposition or antipathy rises in us, the face of those human tides which the blind flow of faith, national or social, often causes. This is the eternal revolt of the free soul against ages of faith to which this faith itself might have given rise, for though faith is, for the minority of the elect, infinite liberty, it is for the mobs who acclaim it, only an additional chain of slavery . . . Gandhi is a *mediaeval* universalist. With all veneration to the Mahatma, I am with Tagore."<sup>1</sup>

In exactly the same manner will Rolland define the term Civil Disobedience. Not the Civil Disobedience of the masses interests him, but that of the individual conscience. However efficacious as a political weapon, it is "humanly" significant only in so far as it expresses a strong individual moral force. Only the Civil Disobedience of the "free soul" matters, not that of the blind masses. And in 1922, in his famous controversy with Barbusse, about the Revolution and his refusal to join any form of bondage, be it ever so new, he for the first time introduces the term Civil Disobedience into a public discussion in France. His pronouncement this time is of the utmost significance. For it still is Olivier who speaks, but he has learnt to act, even though his action, for the time being, carries

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1. *Mahatma Gandhi*, pp. 88-88.

no collective significance: "But there is another weapon, much more powerful and suited for all, to the humblest as well as to the most exalted: it has already proved its efficacy amongst other people, and it is astonishing that no one ever speaks of it in France . . . Civil Disobedience; I do not say passive resistance for, make no mistake, it is the supreme resistance. To refuse his assent and his collaboration with the criminal state is the most heroic act that can be performed by a man of our times; it requires of him, an individual, solitary in the face of the colossal state which could strangle him, in cold blood, behind closed doors—it requires of him an energy and a spirit of sacrifice incomparably greater than he needs to face death whilst he mingles his breath and the sweating agony of his body with that of the herd. A moral force of this sort is not possible until it is aroused in the heart of men—*of each man, individually*; the fire of the conscience, the quasi-mystic sense of the divine which is in every being, and which, in the decisive moments of history, has lifted great nations as high as the very stars."<sup>1</sup>

### III

Rolland's second attempt at integrating Indian thought and religion was of a much more ambitious kind than the first: his "study of mysticism and action in modern India" was the result of many years of research and painstaking labour. While much in his essay on Mahatma Gandhi appears to us today haphazard, disconnected, and sometimes even inconsistent, there is a remarkable continuity of thought in

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1. Second Letter to Henri Barbusse, 2-2-1922. (*I will not Rest*, p. 135), (Italics mine).

the volumes dealing with the lives of Ramkrishna and Vivekananda. And this continuity, it must be remembered, is not only due to a deep understanding of Indian religious thought and practice, but is also part of the evolution of Rolland's own conscience. For as he had reflected himself in the early biographies of his Western masters, so he expressed his innermost self in these books on the two great Indian religious reformers. And as his thought always progresses in ever expanding circles, he will refer the lives of the two Saints of modern India to the heroes of his own past, the religious tradition of the East to the religious tradition of the West. Many a scholar objected to this indiscriminate manner of establishing relationships between religious phenomena which lie on altogether different levels of experience. But they did not understand that Rolland's thought always had to return from where it had started in a never-ending search for unity. And when some say that this unity in human experience does not exist—just as it is absent from the doings and undoings of nature—they forget that the creators, the artists, the 'men of thought', have always risen in protest against the horror of an alien and incomprehensible diversity, have always tried to super-impose a mental unity on their purely instinctual perceptions. For what we experience by our senses is often wicked or cruel or evil. And the mind of man creates what he likes to believe in. If the belief in Unity fails, all other beliefs also will fail him. Scholars may call such a belief a convenient self-deception. In all probability it is; just as much as any metaphysical or philosophical system is based on the

same fundamental self-deception. And Rolland is right when he tells his Western readers "that unity, living and not abstract, is the essence of it all." For he knows that "it is that which the great believers and the great agnostics, who carry it within them, consciously alike adore."<sup>1</sup>

It would be of particular interest to find out when and in what context Rolland used the word "mysticism" in his previous books. It goes without saying that he used it frequently; and the meaning of the word changed according to the person or thing to which it was being applied. Olivier, we hear, was something of a mystic, whereby Rolland means to say that he was a man given to introspection and self-analysis rather than to action. Indeed, this is the meaning commonly applied to mysticism, not only in Rolland's work, but among Western writers in general. It is obvious that this definition will not satisfy those among his readers who have not only theoretical but also practical knowledge of what might be called a mystical experience.<sup>2</sup> They object to Rolland's definition on the ground that, according to him, a mystical experience takes place on a mental plane only and does not involve a complete annihilation of self. Also they suspect a rather sentimental humanitarianism behind the mask of mysticism, and although none of them doubt Rolland's sincerity, they reject his claim as a true exponent of Indian thought. But we here are not concerned with these controversies; what matters to us is Rolland's own evolution as a writer

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1. *The Life of Ramakrishna*, 1881, pp. 7-8.

2. See, for instance, the Letters of Krishnaprem to D. K. Roy on 'Rolland' published in *Anand*.



and thinker, the way in which his conscience expanded in ever wider circles until it embraced the whole of humanity.

If we look at these Eastern biographies from this angle of vision, then indeed they seem to us remarkable—not only as contributions to the knowledge of the East—but especially as steps in Rolland's own development. The subtitle "A study in Mysticism and Action in modern India" also explains the significance of his attempt. For as faith had been related to action in his essay on Gandhi and in his novel *Clerambault*, so now he looks for the link between mystical experience and action. For life has taught him that the spirit without action is the spirit of death. To achieve the harmony of both was his aim in these books. Writing to a friend, in 1930, he explains his attitude quite clearly: "One of the greatest mystics of all time, the Indian Francis of Assisi, Ramkrishna (my favourite Saint) has had the courage to proclaim—he, the lover of God: 'Religion is not for empty stomachs. Neither is mental activity.' And his powerful disciple, the St. Paul of India, Vivekananda, he whose mystic flag . . . bore the pathetic slogan—'My God, the unhappy ones,' has said: 'So long as there should be a famished dog in my country, to feed it would be my only religion.' That is my religion too."<sup>1</sup>

A European who is out to find the meaning of mystical experiences, will have to go far back in the religious tradition of the West before he will reach those "dark" ages when mysticism was a life-giving force and not an abstract formula. It will largely be

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1. *I will not Rest*, p. 302.

a process of re-discovering what had been lost during the centuries of scientific and intellectual progress. It is on such a voyage of discovery that we shall first follow Rolland. We know already from his life that his past heroes lived in "enlightened" ages,—the Michel Angelo of the Renaissance, the Beethoven of the French Revolution and Napoleon, the Shakespeare of Elizabethan England, the Goethe of Weimar. Never before did we have occasion to descend so far back in time, and the gulf between Beethoven and Ramkrishna or Goethe and St. Francis of Assisi, seems almost unbridgeable. But those who look at thought as though it were a straight line moving forward in one direction only, will never understand Rolland's circuitous thought, the expanding circles of awareness or to use the most relevant image, the ever-increasing harmony of sounds. No, neither "Shakespeare nor Beethoven nor Tolstoy nor Rome" were enough: they never revealed to him anything "except the 'Open Sesame' of my subterranean city." This "city" is Rolland's own soul, buried under the lava of conflicting experiences. One has to excavate first before one reaches "the staircase in the wall, spiral like the coils of a serpent" which "winds from the subterranean depths of the Ego to the high terraces crowned by the stars."<sup>1</sup> And what he found there was no unknown country. He had seen it all before, though he cannot remember where. And the experience of the past becomes once more alive in him. What had been buried for so many centuries he now found again. And he read it and re-read it, "every word clear and complete, in the book of life held out to me by the illiterate

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1. *Life of Ramkrishna*, p. 11.

genius who knew all its pages by heart—Ramkrishna.”<sup>1</sup> Many individuals carry this “subterranean city” about with them without being themselves aware of it. Only at times, when the intensity of their life overwhelms them, does this awareness break through: it is then that they reveal their “secret thought.” Rolland who has been in correspondence with hundreds of people in Europe and America during the last twenty years bears witness to it in his book on Vivekananda, and he adds: “It is not because they and I have unwittingly been subject to infiltration of the Indian spirit which predisposes us to the contagion—as certain representatives of the Ramkrishna Mission appear to believe.”<sup>2</sup>

A disposition to Indian thought, or to Vedantism, is, according to Rolland, inherent in all human beings, both in the East and in the West. It is no accident, he thinks, that the crisis of spiritual renaissance in New England coincided with a similar religious revival in India. The old image of the tree recurs again in this context, and he is concerned with the branches “mutually sharing the same changing seasons” rather than with the roots. The synchronism in the evolution of the various groups that constitute humanity cannot be merely accidental. For whatever may be the laws that govern the history of peoples, nations, classes, and their struggles, they are “subordinate to greater cosmic laws controlling the greater evolution of humanity.”<sup>3</sup> And if, historically speaking, such a pre-disposition to Vedantism exists everywhere alike, nothing is more natural than that it should find

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

2. *Life of Vivekananda*, p. 385.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

spontaneous expression in the works or lives of great thinkers or reformers—regardless of any outside influences. Emerson, Thoreau, and Walt Whitman seem to him the best instances of such a pre-disposition “which existed in America long before the advent of Vivekananda.” Indeed, he continues, “it is a universal disposition of the human soul in all countries and in all ages, and not contained, as Indian Vedantists are inclined to believe in a body of doctrines belonging to one country alone. On the contrary it is only helped or hindered by the chances of evolution among the different peoples, and the creeds and customs whereon their own civilizations are built.”<sup>1</sup>

Such an attitude is open to controversy. For the “chances of evolution” are many, and as for the creeds and customs, they will appear quite irrelevant to a Vedantist. Rolland’s definition of an inherent Vedantism implied a division of minds into those who are unconsciously predisposed to Vedantism and those who, even despite outside influences, will never be able to rise above the commonplace level of the average man’s religious experience. It is his old distinction between the elite and the masses, the precursors and the herd, which reappears again in an Indian setting. The “Market Place” which teaches Jean Christophe the crude realities of life is not a fitting environment for Vedantists. Olivier who, Rolland says, had something of a “mystic” in him, finds it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to adjust himself to the new gospel of scientific progress and economic prosperity. Indeed his death is symbolic of at least a temporary decline of Western spiri-

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1. *Life of Vivekananda*, p. 70.

tuality. But Rolland had never ceased fighting for the better spirit of Europe. And now that he has found it in Asia, he becomes conscious of what Western intellectuals had long ago forgotten: "These ideas and aspirations are none of them alien to the West . . . The writer of this work has denounced and disavowed the 'Market Place' of Europe, the smoke and cinders of the volcano, with sufficient severity, to be able to vindicate the burning sources of our inexhaustible spirituality. He has never ceased to recall their existence and the persistence of 'better Europe', both to outsiders who misunderstand her, and to herself, as she sits wrapped in silence . . ."<sup>1</sup>

The reproach of humanitarianism, however, is not quite unfounded. We still remember how, since the end of the war, Rolland had taken an increasing interest in the people, and how he had tried his best to relate the activities of the elite to those of the masses. In Mahatma Gandhi already he had found the new unity between faith and action. And now he realizes that the mystic experiences also is allied to the suffering and toil of the masses. For however perfect the individual conscience may become, the moment it is divorced from the life of the people, it will lose the very context in which it has its being. For not only is the "active omnipotence that radiates from intense and withdrawn mystical thought" in no way alien to the great contemplative orders of the West, but even modern lay thought is reflected in it as well; "for wherein lies the difference from the homage we render in a democratic form from the bottom of our hearts to the thousands of silent workers, whose life of toil and

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1. *Life of Vivekananda*, p. 387.

meditation is the reserve of heroism and the genius of the nation?" For he himself, Rolland, "striving to hear the inner voice," has heard "the voices of the nameless ones rising like the sound of the sea whence clouds and rivers are born—the dumb thousands whose unexpressed knowledge is the substance of my thoughts and the main-spring of my will."<sup>1</sup> Religion as pure contemplation is not enough. It would only be a repetition of the ivory tower of the European elite. Religion that is part of the life of the people, that is, religion as social action, is the only true spirituality. And once again, in the Indian setting of religious or mystical experience, we hear Rolland speak of social action. The individual will have to lift himself up above his own "inner voice", his conscience, and only when he can clearly hear the voices of the people, will he be ripe for social action. Beethoven, Michel Angelo, and Shakespeare were great voices lost in the wilderness. It needed a Ramakrishna and a Vivekananda to bring Rolland back to the earth. And perhaps it is not an accidental coincidence either, that at the same time as he discovered Mahatma Gandhi, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, he also discovered the active faith that was trying to build up the new Russia out of the wreckage of the old.

#### IV

It does not really matter whether we call Rolland's new faith 'humanitarianism.' There is no doubt that already at that time reactionary parties all over the world considered him to be a communist, while the

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1. *Life of Vivekananda*, p. 235.

Third International looked upon him as an incurable individualist or something of a counter-revolutionary. The fact that Rolland at the end of the twenties was neither of the two, need not be particularly stressed. And if we call his attempt to fuse his individual conscience with social action, "humanitarianism," we do not mean to condemn his attitude, but rather to point out a step in his evolution. Social action born of a mature moral awareness is in no way inconsistent with anything he had written or said previously. For as he had formerly wanted to bring the artists and intellectuals down from their ivory-tower, in the same way he feels that the mystical experience must be intimately related to the life of the people. It almost seems as though he deliberately chose those among the mystics of India who showed the way to social action. But however intentional it might have been, the inner logic of his evolution is admirable in its consistency. "When I set out on an intellectual pilgrimage to India, I brought back with me not the static dream of the infinite in which Indian thought is exhausted, but men who knew how to derive energy from Dream, men who could plunge into the seething arena of Action: Gandhi, the shepherd of the people, and the hero, Vivekananda."<sup>1</sup> Rolland calls his pilgrimage "intellectual". And that, Vedantists in India, will not easily forgive him: for according to them, the intellect has very little to do with mystical experience, -for only on a supra-mental plane can this experience be achieved. There is no doubt that Rolland misunderstood the deeper significance of this experience. He was unconsciously driven to identify social action

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<sup>1</sup>. *I will not Rest*, p. 55.

and mystical thought, and he found this identification most complete in the India of today. According to him, it was Vivekananda who had struck a rude blow "at the selfishness of a purely contemplative faith,"<sup>1</sup> it was this religious revival that had hauled India "out of the shifting sands of barren speculation, wherein she had been engulfed for centuries . . . ; and the result was that the whole reservoir of mysticism, sleeping beneath, broke its bounds and spread by a series of great ripples into action."<sup>2</sup>

We are not surprised when we find Rolland comparing Vivekananda with Tolstoy. For Tolstoy had provided him with standards by which to measure the thoughts and actions of all the great ones throughout his life, and just as Olivier, the "unconscious disciple of Tolstoy", could not see suffering on earth without suffering himself, and grew pale at the mention of pain inflicted in the past, so also Vivekananda is "the trembling of India incarnate" and "the smallest pang suffered by its inarticulate flesh sent a repercussion through the whole tree." Vivekananda's personality and work infused a new energy into the people of India. It was an energy "to do good," but also it led indirectly to the national revival of India. And as Rolland had expressed his doubts regarding the mass-movements initiated by Mahatma Gandhi, he now also sees in Indian nationalism, first of all, "the urge of the fever which has taken possession of the world at this moment of history—the fatal urge of Nationalism, whose monstrous effects we see today. It was, therefore, at its very inception, fraught with danger."<sup>3</sup>

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1. *Life of Vivekananda* p. 351.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 352.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 191.



It is doubtful, how far social action without a certain minimum of national consciousness is at all possible. In an ideal "international" society social work will no doubt always be directed to the alleviation of suffering of everyone alike. But the division of the world into small national rivalries, into ruling and oppressed nations, makes social action a politically and economically determined form of activity. It is indeed significant that the desire for social action should have sprung up simultaneously with a revival of national consciousness. The "pure" internationalist frequently forgets that political and economic factors are an indispensable part of all social action and that nationalism—however evil its consequences—has always led to vigorous and dynamic social reconstruction. Rolland's note of warning, therefore, should be understood in its proper context. Even in the case of Mahatma Gandhi he always admired the method rather than the goal of his leadership. Civil Disobedience as a political technique, even as a quasi-religious creed is, according to Rolland, Mahatma Gandhi's greatest contribution to humanity. The national implications are secondary. For Rolland had not yet learnt to think in terms of politics. His attitude remains that of a convinced idealist and individualist, whose own conscience, while driving him to action, also prevents him from acting. He could never forget the idols of his youth and early manhood, those master-artists whose aloofness from politics, from the herd, guaranteed their greatness. And as Tolstoy always provided him with a standard by which to measure social action, Beethoven always stood for the

"great soul" struggling for fulfilment in the solitude of creation.

It is quite in the nature of things that Rolland should have found in his studies in Indian mysticism a link—howsoever vague—between the individualism of Beethoven and the collectivism of modern Russia. Although this new combination—for an attempt at synthesis it undoubtedly is—may seem extraordinary to some, it is consistent with his previous thought and work. For while the intense concentration of the mind of the Indian saints reminded him again and again of Beethoven's creative process, their social programme led him to a re-valuation of his conception of the "herd." That is why a new book on Beethoven coincided with his research on Indian mysticism as well as with his discovery of the implications of modern Russia. Even a casual glance at his book on Vivekananda will reveal a number of startling statements about the supposed similarity in the concentration of thought required for Yogic practices, on the one hand, and artistic creation, on the other. Thus, we read, for instance, that Vivekananda could attain the heights of contemplation only "by sudden flights amid tempests which remind me over and over again of Beethoven."<sup>1</sup> Later on he speaks of the mystical experience as "an attitude of mind latent in all who carry within themselves a spark of the creative fire" and mentions particularly "Beethoven's crises of Dionysiac union with the mother, to use one name for the hidden Being whom the heart perceives in each earthbeat."<sup>2</sup> He goes so far as to say that in all countries and at all

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1. *Life of Vivekananda*, p. 4.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

times thinkers and artists have unconsciously practised intense meditation, and again gives the example of Beethoven who "in complete ignorance of Raja Yoga in the strict sense of the word"<sup>1</sup> achieved it and thereby wrecked his physical organism to such an extent that it brought about the final tragedy of his deafness. And lastly he insists upon the fact that Vivekananda "although an artist by race and a born musician went so far as to reject the dangerous power of artistic emotion, especially that produced by music, over the exact working of the mind."<sup>2</sup>

These are not casual remarks. They evidently refer to Rolland's re-valuation of the artistic process, of the individual struggling for self-expression in the wilderness and chaos of his own soul. And in his new book on Beethoven, published in 1929, he presents the reader with a new conception of musical creation closely akin to Yogic practice. It goes without saying that this new theory applies only to the chosen few, the master-artists of all ages: "Music develops in its own elect that power of concentration on an idea, that form of *Yoga*, that is purely European, having the traits of action and domination that are characteristic of the West: for music is an edifice in motion, all the parts of which have to be sensed simultaneously. It demands of the soul a vertiginous movement in the immobile, the eye clear, the will taut, the spirit flying high and free over the whole field of dreams..."<sup>3</sup> Later on, in the same book, he speaks of the connection between Beethoven's 'perpetual congestion of thought

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1. *Life of Vivekananda*, p. 266.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

3. *Beethoven the Creator*, 1929, pp. 42-43.

that never ceased its concentration and the catastrophe that over took the organism."<sup>1</sup> Everything in Rolland's theory, therefore, seems to point to the fact that Beethoven's deafness was due to misunderstood and uncontrolled yogic practices. That is indeed Rolland's final conclusion when he discusses the causes of Beethoven's tragedy. In a special Appendix to the book, he quotes from one of his speeches, delivered in Vienna in 1927, dealing with Beethoven's deafness. And following the same line of research as in his books on Ramakrishna and Vivekanada, he puts his conclusions in most unmistakable language before his listeners. According to him, Beethoven's "passionate pursuit, this multiplication of the idea that has been seized upon, bent to his will, subdued . . . produces on simple and sincere natures that yield themselves up to it an effect of hypnosis, a Yoga. Like the Indian Yoga, once one has attained to it one carries it about with one everywhere, when walking, talking, working, in every act of the daily life . . ."<sup>2</sup> Rolland knows enough of the dangers inherent in Yogic practices which, if uncontrolled and executed in a haphazard manner may lead to cerebral apoplexy and mental alienation. And when Rolland sent this diagnosis to Dr. Marage, who had specialised for thirty years in the study of hearing and its variation, and since 1900 had observed thousands of cases of deafness, he entirely agreed with Rolland's suggestion: "Your comparison with Indian Yoga appears to me to be very exact," he writes and also testifies to other cases of deafness due to intense concentration of thought.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 342.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 280.

But for Romain Rolland this discovery was of the utmost importance. For does not Beethoven's tragedy imply the tragedy of all those creators who in their gigantic effort to subdue the raw material of life to their will, detach themselves completely from all external control and discipline, thereby losing hold of life itself? For however valuable the created work may be, however great the mental concentration, life always re-asserts itself, and what had been repressed for a long time, breaks out, in form of psycho-physiological disturbances. For our own study, however, it is significant that Rolland had learnt his lesson from his research in Indian mysticism. And we can see now his last step towards fulfilment: the greatness of the creator is one with the greatness of the people among which he lives. For never can the individual fulfil himself in a social vacuum. The unconscious creations of the people will again be reflected in the works of the master-artist. His awareness, his mental discipline, his will which subdues the ever-moving passions of his soul, they are all rooted in the "black earth," in the speech, in the toil, and in the blood of the people.

## POLITICAL RE-ORIENTATION

WHAT had happened to Rolland during these post-war years is symptomatic of the fate that overtook all—except the most esoteric—Western writers. Their belief in the freedom of the mind, the values they attached to individual conscience, and their moral convictions, were shattered by the gradual decline of the Western democracies and the rise of Fascism. Till 1930 it had still been possible to remain “above the battle,” to cultivate an artificial seclusion from the market-place of Europe. But when a few years later the first exiles of oppression invaded their complacent and self-satisfied existence, when they saw from far away the cultural heritage of the past thrown on the funeral pyres of a fast-vanishing civilization, when they heard of the heroic exploits of intellectuals, artists, and scholars, on the blood-stained battlefields of Spain, they were forced to take sides. It was easy enough for the young ones, the generation that was born after Christophe had died. But Rolland, in 1930, was already sixty-four years old, and more than half of his life had been spent in those “good old times” of before the last war. And although he had never considered these times either “good” or “old,” yet the effort involved in a re-adjustment of values was almost beyond his strength. Not that he ever hesitated which side to choose. Indeed the “free conscience” always found itself “on the right side of the barri-

cade." But there is a difference between a purely mental or intellectual choice and the action to which such a choice obliges. The alternative for Rolland never was which side to choose, but which method to use in order to bring social or political action to a successful end. And the fact that political action involved violence of one kind or another, proved to be the stumbling-block for the old generation of writers in Europe.

We have alluded to this conflict more than once in the course of this study. And if now we devote a whole chapter to it, it is because the conflict, in the course of Rolland's life, gradually rose from the level of purely abstract speculation to that of concrete political reality. When in the preceding chapters we spoke of the intellectual's conflict between Thought and Action, it was, as a rule connected with the discrepancy existing between the elite and the people, those who think and cannot act and those who act without thinking. Rolland's "precursors" were always those who lost themselves in an intense concentration of thought and who—though intellectually in advance of their time—could fulfil only their own life, not that of the people. And even their fulfilment was fraught with tragedy: Beethoven's deafness, Michel Angelo's morbidity, Tolstoy's negation of art and science. The war and, shortly after, his Indian pilgrimage, opened Rolland's eyes to the necessity of combining thought and action, of fusing the two elements which till now had separated the intellectual elite from the masses. But such a synthesis was possible only if and when Action conforms to Thought, that is, if and when

Action will be co-ordinated with the moral principles of an unfettered individual conscience. The rise of Fascism, first in Italy, and then in Germany, prevented any effective action on the part a "free mind" or an individual conscience. It was then only, when Rolland was almost seventy years old, that he discovered, or rather re-discovered, that stream of faith, that collective conscience which formed the main subject-matter of his earliest plays. From 1930 onwards he himself is carried on the crest of the wave, a forerunner of the gospel freedom, a fighter for the independence, not of one, but of all minds.

There can be no more fitting conclusion to this book than to follow Rolland in these struggles from nineteenth-century individualism in a social vacuum to the incarnation of a collective conscience. It is the same evolution that leads him from Tolstoy to Mahatma Gandhi, from Beethoven to Vivekananda, from Jean Christophe to Clerambault and Annette in *The Soul Enchanted*. For "Jean Christophe, Colas, Clerambault, Annette and her son, lived and died for all men. The idea never occurred to them of separating their causes from that of society—not even to the 'one against all' who resisted others in order to save them. They needed people in order to serve, not to be served by them. And they fused themselves with those people either in spirit, or in the works they fashioned, or by their personal sacrifices. They were themselves a people—a toiling people, ever on the job. Their individuality is in its essence collective. But they all reared up, and their author, too, with them,—like a horse that sees a shadow on the road—as soon as their



sacrosanct individualism was touched.”<sup>1</sup> Rolland’s “little church” is built on the peak of a mountain. Only from time to time his heroes of old come down into the plains to fight their weary battles for freedom. And soon they are back again among the clouds, “they had but one desire—to get out of it all and return to their own realms . . . the realms of the air, the vision of art.”<sup>2</sup> They were the children of the author’s own illusion. He has shaped them, has given them life, according to his own craving for independence and free choice. They were his dreams, and he, the dreamer. For all through the war-years and after, Rolland “persisted in defending this abstract liberty of thought without heeding that. If the phantom was to take substance, it was necessary in the first place to capture it and prepare the soil in which the ideal-plant could take root.”<sup>3</sup> And while he, the dreamer, and his heroes, side with the revolution, he absent-mindedly plants the tree upside down with its roots in the air. The revolution as an abstract intellectual proposition is accepted as part of a greatly desired social progress. The revolution as a political act is the horror of Europe all over again: oppression, misery, violence, death. It will take Rolland some time before he realizes that, however pure the roots may be when exposed to light and air, they are liable to wither and decay. And he looks at the leaves falling one by one from his upturned tree, until a violent storm blows them away all at once, leaving only the bare and slightly ridiculous skeleton of broken and

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1. *I will not Rest*, P. 60. (Italics mine).

2. *I will not Rest*, p. 10.

3. *Ibid.*,

twisted branches against a sky red with the fast spreading fire.

## II

In April 1922 Rolland leaves France for the second time and settles again in Switzerland; in the same year also Gorki voluntarily exiled himself from Russia. Rolland will remain in Switzerland till shortly before the outbreak of the second world war. But before leaving France he has made his position clear to friends and enemies alike. The reactionaries, it is true, had given him up long ago. Between the Peace-Treaty and his departure for Switzerland most of his time was taken up with discussions with some of the leading left-wing writers in France on the problem of revolution. For the younger generation of French intellectuals, the Russian revolution marked the beginning of a new age. The political significance of the event overshadowed all moral implications. But for Rolland who had just then finished writing *Clerambault* and was shortly going to discover Mahatma Gandhi, the moral implications of a revolution were of infinitely greater importance than the goal to be attended. Let us also remember his insistence on the individual conscience at that time, his rejection of all "streams of faith" for strong and free souls, and we shall understand his first opposition to the Russian revolution. For his argument, since *Clerambault*, had been that it is the means that shape the mind of man and not the end. An overemphasis on means also implies an insistence on moral values. Already in *Clerambault* he had written: "That is

why I regard it as essential to defend moral values, more perhaps during a revolution than in ordinary times. For revolutions are moulting periods, when the spirit of the nation is more susceptible to change."

But how can moral values be maintained in a disintegrating world, how can the individual live up to his own standards of morality when all round him a gigantic collective conspicusness arises which is entirely devoid of any ethical convictions or principles? This indeed was the question that Rolland asked himself during those fateful post-war years when the destiny of Europe was being decided anew—not on battlefields, but in the newly arisen political parties built on the ideology of the ignorant and easily misguided masses. Rolland's "Declaration of the Independence of the Mind" appears here in an entirely new light. For it was at that time that Rolland realized that only this Independence of the Mind, the free individual conscience, can uphold those moral values which were threatened by the collective neurosis of the time. Speaking of those years, 1921-22, he remembers his ceaseless "campaign against the subjection of the mind to this violence, which in the frenzy of the times was regarded not only as a weapon, but as a banner. My revolt against it was fed by the desperate appeals of independent revolutionaries against Bolshevik oppression or repression; by the accounts of friends in whom I had confidence, returning from Russia, full of resentment; and need I say, by the letters even of Gorki who had just left

the U.S.S.R. and given himself up to fits of bitter and melancholy pessimism.”<sup>1</sup>

It is during these years that his controversy with Barbusse, the intellectual leader of the French communists, takes place. It began with an attack of Barbusse against what he calls “Rollandism,” the aloofness of a certain group of intellectuals from the revolution and from all progressive political parties. According to Barbusse, the independence of thought cannot be maintained in modern capitalist society: only by joining those political parties that fight for freedom and by actively supporting this fight, can the freedom of conscience be maintained. Rolland’s reply is peculiarly “unpolitical.” He, first of all, protests against the reproach of “detachment”: have not all his books, especially since 1914, glorified social action? Has he not sympathised with the suffering of the masses and has he not tried to show them a path towards light and freedom? There is only one man in Russia, he continues, who has maintained his independence of judgment and his critical intelligence, Lenin. But as he also is surrounded by doctrinaires and “the walls of the Kremlin,” his influence must necessarily be limited by the dogmatic attitude of the party: “So long as I do not feel in a party this passion for truth, with its corollary, respect for free criticism: so long as I see nothing there except the will to win at all costs, and by any means, and this confusion of the interests of the party with absolute justice and good; in a word, so long as the spirit of the servant of the

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1. *I will not Rest*, p. 23.

Revolution remains narrowly political, despising under the name of 'anarchism' or of 'sentimentalism' the sacred claim of the free conscience, I shall hold myself aloof, without having any illusions as to the issue of the conflict."<sup>1</sup> It is obvious that Rolland uses the word Revolution in an entirely different sense from the one implied by communists; a revolution is, first and foremost, a matter concerning human beings, their beliefs and their system of values. Every revolution also involves the individual in a revaluation of moral standards. "The Revolution is not the property of a party," he exclaims in a second letter to Barbusse, "The Revolution is a mansion of all those who wish for a better and happier humanity . . . There are some of us who make the claim of remaining within the Revolution, and of remaining there as free men."<sup>2</sup>

His argument, it goes without saying did not convince his friends. They considered this conflict of loyalties a mere matter of intellectual abstraction, to be taken seriously only on the plane of philosophical speculation, not on the plane of action. This, according to them, was a quixotic attitude, the one indeed that had made Olivier desire the progress of the people without being himself able to contribute anything to it but his own over-refined sensibility. And when Rolland in an article in April 1922—a few days before his departure for Switzerland—exclaims, "Our present problem is to find a harmony in which the legitimate exigencies of the socio-economic Revolution and those not less legitimate of spiritual liberty

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1. *I will not Rest*, p. 130.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

would be reconciled,"<sup>1</sup> they smiled at his idealism and his obstinacy in opposing those streams of faith which alone could save humanity from a final disaster. Rolland consciously made himself the mouthpiece of an intelligentsia assailed by a wave of pessimism and a sense of futility at the happenings around them. Not only in France, but in all the Western countries of Europe—including Germany—the same feeling of frustration prevailed at that time, and what many of the intellectuals only thought, Rolland committed to paper and thereby became for the time being the only exponent of individualism on a moral basis in a world torn by conflicting ideologies of a collective character. It is not for us to decide whether this was a reactionary attitude or not. In the case of some intellectuals at that time it undoubtedly was. But no one could accuse Rolland of conservative habits of mind, of an orthodox traditionalism, or preconceived bias. Within the context of his own evolution, his opposition to the Russian revolution, during the first few years after the last war, is perfectly logical. And that he was not alone is shown in the following letter written to him by Gorki with reference to Rolland's controversy with Barbusse: "... The ideas which you have developed in your letter to Barbusse are excellent heretical ideas. They express in a clear fashion the basis of 'Rollandism' as I have understood it in the light of *Jean Christophe* and your other books. There are and there never can be any true Socialists so long as the conscience of the proletariat is not penetrated, from

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<sup>1</sup>"The Revolution and the Intellectuals: A letter to my Communist Friends". Publ. in *L'Art, Libre*. April 1922.

the dawn of its birth, with a morality as strong as religion."<sup>1</sup>

It was then that he discovered India, first Mahatma Gandhi, and later on the two modern Saints of Bengal. Here was a revolution—both on the mental and the material plane—unlike any other collective movement in the past. His communist friends again looked askance at him, when he started applying the principles of non-violence to the marxist revolution—for the two seemed to exclude each other. But Rolland who had built the bridge leading from Tolstoy to Gandhi, continued his work of synthesis: the gulf between the non-violence of Gandhi's faith and the violence marxist reconstruction must again be bridged: "I devoted myself to the paradoxical task of wedding fire to water, of reconciling the ideas of India with those of Moscow. Even in the Introduction to *Young India*, I dare say that there is less distance between the Mahatma's non-violence and the violence of the Revolutionaries, which are open adversaries, than between his heroic disobedience and the servile ataraxy of the eternal yes-men who are the concrete with which every tyranny is built and the cement of all the reactions."<sup>2</sup> And during the same period Rolland for the first time defines what he means by revolutionary spirit. According to him, it is always open to new and dynamic influences from outside, and every goal achieved implies a new ideal; thus the truly revolutionary spirit marches from fulfilment to fulfilment never stopping the current of faith which

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1. Cited in *I will not Rest*, p. 74.

2. *Ibid* p. 40.

carries everything before it. If a new social falsehood has been built upon the old prejudices of society, the revolutionary spirit has failed to achieve its end. It will have to oppose alike "the new prejudices of the proletarian revolution" and "the old prejudices of the bourgeois democracy."<sup>1</sup>

Only very gradually does his attitude towards the Revolution change. All through these years he expresses his aversion for "certain methods of its police," for "its narrowness of doctrine," and "its dictatorial spirit." But he also wishes it to be acknowledged that he was "among the first to recognize its greatness and its historic necessity"; indeed he admits that the new Russia "is the powerful vanguard of human society."<sup>2</sup> With this statement the barriers that formerly divided him from the Revolution were broken. Even a cursory glance at the articles written during the following years will show us the broadening of Rolland's conscience. These articles embrace a large variety of subjects, among them the Defence of the U.S.S.R. and international peace; the struggle against capitalist exploitation and militarist imperialism; and, lastly, the fight against Facism. There is first his "Rejoinder to the Russian emigré writers Constantine Balmont and Ivan Bounine" (*Europe*, 15 February 1928); then "The Kellog Pact and the Comedy of Peace" (*L'Effort*, 30 October 1928), "The Piracy of Peace" (*Europe*, 19 April 1930); "Europe, open, broaden yourself or

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1. Reply to an Address from the State Academy of the Sciences of Art. at Moscow, on 20th October 1928.

2. Letter to Lunatcharsky, People's Commissary for Public Education 23rd September 1927.



Perish!" ( *La Nouvelle Revue Mondiale*, February 1931); "Greetings to Gorki" (May and October 1931); "Good-bye to the Past" (*Europe*, 15th June 1931); "Individualism and Humanism" (published in Russia): open letters to Valentin Boulgakov, on self-sacrifice in heroic violence as in non-violence (11 April 1929); to Serge Radine, on "Communist Materialism" (19th March 1931) to Edmund Privat on "The Revolution and Non-Violence"; and a large number of messages, declarations, and appeals to various international organisations.

Fascism has taught many an intellectual in Europe a lesson. It gradually dawned upon them that abstract discussions on Ends and Means, on the problem of non-resistance or non-aggression, were 'futile, as long as the social order in which they lived was largely based upon violence—either direct or indirect. To change the social order any 'means' are permitted, even, if need be, violence; "The whole question," says Rolland in 1931, "is to now whether the constructive programme of the U.S.S.R. is leading to a more just human organisation, the only just and fruitful one . . ." And if the reply to this question is in the affirmative, then "one has no right to make gestures of disgust because the builders had to soil their hands . . ." <sup>1</sup> For one cannot build a house or plant a tree without soiling one's hands. We shall judge the work not by the "purity" of the hands that accomplished it, but by the strength of the masonry and the foundation. "The essential point is not 'violence or non-violence', it is 'Act'. Neither to

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1. Letter to Serge Radine on "Communist Materialism", 19-3-1931.

desert or to slink away at the fatal hour. The worst defeat, the only irremediable defeat is that inflicted not by the enemy but by one's self."<sup>1</sup>

And when in June 1933, Romain Rolland was nominated honorary president of the International Anti-Fascist Committee, he had left behind him for good the cloud-capped peaks of his youth and early manhood, he had entered the battlefield of modern politics he himself, the precursor of a saner and better world. And shortly before the outbreak of the second world war he felt that Switzerland is too narrow a country for his ever-widening conscience. In 1938 he settled in a small property of his own in his native Burgundy, on the ancient hill of Vezelay. There near one of the most beautiful Romano-gothic cathedrals in France he spent the remaining years of his life. We know very little of what happened to him there. He saw the horror of misguided fanaticism spread all over Europe, he again heard the cries of anguish and torment of exiles driven from one country to another, he experienced the rise of all the reactionary forces in the West in a last gigantic attempt to stem the inevitable progress towards freedom. *Jean Christophe* was burned in the market-places of Germany together with the poems of Heine, the treatises of Einstein and Sigmund Freud. And his voice which, so feeble at first, had tried to appease the rising storm, is now altogether drowned by the tumult and chaos of a final cataclysm. And we see the old man, bent by the weight of years, sitting at the piano again and

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1. Letter to a German Friend against the Abdication of the German Social Democratic Party, 31-8-1933.

playing in the falling darkness Beethoven's music, those very tunes that had haunted him all through his childhood and youth, the striving for harmony of a defeated soul. But his defeat, Rolland's as well as Beethoven's is like that of his hero Saint Louis, the victory of the spirit over matter.

Across space and time that separate him from his masters, across the darkness and the mists that gradually cover the people of the earth, comes to him the song that is pure and perfect and inviolate. For music is no longer an escape: in it are fused all the elements of his life, his striving for greatness, his fulfilment, his defeat. And while his country, the home of Olivier and Colas Breugnon, Clerambault and Annette, was hidden in darkness, and all the "little churches" were crumbling into dust, and the tormented people were marching side by side on the long road to exile, the song to which he had been listening, imperceptibly changed into a chorus—and he could hear the voices of the persecuted and the slain, the voices of the eternally defeated. And when he closed his eyes he could distinguish in the rising and swelling of the waves, the voices of the past and the voices of the future. And in the present that was dark and full of ugliness, falsehood and evil, they were all as one.

## APPENDIX

### ROMAIN ROLLAND AND TOLSTOY

[This is a *verbatim* reprint of the first letter of Rolland to Tolstoy and Tolstoy's reply to it as published in "The Modern Review," Calcutta, in January 1927, p. 83 sq.

These two letters were translated into English by Dr. Kalidas Nag; to the best of our knowledge they have never appeared in a book in English before. We would like to express our gratitude both to the translator and the Editor, "Modern Review," for having kindly given us permission to quote these letters here.

Rolland's letter, which is available in fragments only, was written in 1887 when he was still a student in the *Normal School*.]

Sir,

I would not have dared to write to you if I had not to express to you my passionate admiration. It seems that I know you well enough through your works to address to you a few compliments which would appear almost impertinent on the part of a boy like me . . . I am tormented by the idea of Death which I find haunting almost every page of your novels and above all in your *Ivan Ilytch* . . . I am convinced that ordinary life is not the real life . . . The reality of Life is in the renunciation of the egotistic opposition of the living creatures, and in our close union with the Supreme Life—the Universal being—we should try immediately to get fused into that Life. That is your thought, I believe. My thoughts also follow the same line . . . I understand that to realise that renunciation of selfish

personality, we must avoid all barren sentimentality and work for the benefit of all. And you say, sir, that benefit to others, practical charity, and bodily work alone can tear ourselves away from the baneful consciousness of our limited ego, can give us the *ataraxy* or equitude of thought, the peaceful sleep of the heart, the only blessing . . . It is this oblivion of one's self, sir, that I am seeking, that I desire with all my heart, and I believe that I shall attain it. But why do you insist that it can come only through *manual* labour? I ask you this question which engages my heart most strongly: Why do you condemn Art? Should you not use it rather as the most perfect instrument for the realisation of renunciation? I read your new work "What To Do?" The problem of Art is assigned there to quite the last place. You say that you condemn Art without giving all the reasons for your proscription. Excuse me if I cannot wait any longer and permit me to ask you your reasons. I believe to have understood that you condemn Art because you detect there the selfish desire of subtle enjoyments which make our selfishness more coarse by the hyper-excitability of our senses. I know that, alas for most of the so-called artists, Art is nothing but an aristocratic sensualism.

But is not Art something else, something more, and which means *everything* to a small number of artists? To them it is only Art which means the oblivion of the selfish individuality, the absorption into the Divine Unity, the creative Ecstasy. In that state what can Death do to us? Death is dead. Sovereign Art has killed Death . . .

Am I wrong? Do tell me, Sir, if I am mistaken. I am in love with Art because it shatters my miserable Ego and unifies me with the Eternal Life . . . Do you not believe that Art has a great role to play, above all amongst the old races of men who are dying through the excesses of their civilisation? . . .

Please reply to me, sir! Tell me in all sincerity, if labour without thought which you extol, would really satisfy you. Would you never regret this sacrifice of Thought and the disowning of Art; and moreover, is it possible to reject Thought and Art by the simple fact of our wishing?....

I am in need of advice. I find near about me not a single guide or moral preceptor. In France, in Europe, I find only indifferent or sceptical people or dilettantes . . ."

ROMAIN ROLLAND

### TOLSTOY'S REPLY

4 October, 1887

To Mon. Romain Rolland

Dear Brother!

I received your first letter. It touched me deeply in my heart. I read it with tears in my eyes. I had the intention of repying to it, but could not make time, and over and above the difficulty that I feel in writing in French, I must write lengthily in reply to your questions which are largely based on a misunderstanding.

The questions raised by you are: Why does manual labour impose itself on us as one of the essential con-

ditions of our true happiness? Must we voluntarily cut ourselves away from all intellectual activities of science and art, which seem to be incompatible with manual labour?

To these questions I have replied, so far as I could in the book entitled *What To Do?* which, I hear, has been translated into French. I have never presented manual labour as a principle, but only as the application of the most simple and natural moral law which is the very first to appear before all sincere people.

Manual labour, in our depraved society—the society of the so-called civilised people—imposes itself on us uniquely by reason of the fact that the principal defect of that Society was and is down to this day, that we have freed ourselves from manual labour and are profiting by the labour of the poorer classes; they are ignorant, unfortunate, veritable slaves like the slaves of the old world and we do nothing for them in comparison with what they do for us.

The very first proof of the sincerity of the people of this society professing the principles of Christianity, philosophical or humanitarian, is to try to come as much as possible out of this contradiction.

To succeed in this, we have the simplest and the readiest method of manual labour which starts with the act of taking care of oneself. I would never believe in the sincerity of Christian convictions, philosophical or humanitarian, of a person who allows his own chamber-pot to be cleaned by a servant.

The shortest and simplest moral formula is to take the service of others as little as possible, and to serve others as much as possible, to demand the best need

to give the utmost possible in our relations with others.

This formula, which gives a rational meaning to our existence and the happiness which results from it removes all the difficulties at one stroke; no less the difficulty appearing before you: that relating to the role of intellectual activity—to Science and Art.

Following the above principle, I admit that I am never satisfied and happy until I have the firm conviction that while acting I am making myself useful to others. The contentment of those for whom I act is an extra, a surplus of happiness on which I do not count and which cannot influence the choice of my actions. My firm conviction, that what I do is neither useless nor evil but is something for the good of others, is therefore the principal condition of my happiness.

And it is this, which involuntarily urges a sincere and ethical man to prefer manual work to scientific and artistic works. The book that I write needs the work of the printers; the symphony that I compose needs the work of musicians; the experiments that I make need the work of those who manufacture the instruments of laboratories, the picture that I paint needs the work of those who make the colours and canvas. All these works may be useful to men, but may also be completely useless and even injurious as it often happens in many cases. Thus while I work at things whose utility is highly debatable and to produce which I must moreover make others work, I have before and around me, endless things to do, of which one and all, are undoubtedly useful to others, and to produce which I need not make a single person



work: a burden to carry for one who is fatigued, a field to cultivate for a peasant proprietor who is ill, a wound to dress—millions of things like these which surround us, which require nobody's help, which produce immediate contentment in those for whose welfare you have performed the act: planting a tree, tending a calf, cleansing a well, and such works are, beyond doubt, useful to others and which cannot but be preferred by a sincere man to doubtful occupations which in our world are preached as the highest and the noblest vocations of man.

The vocation of a prophet is high and noble. But we know what sort of people are the priests who believe themselves to be prophets only, because it is to their advantage and they have the chance of passing for prophets.

A prophet is not a person who receives the education of a prophet but who has the intimate conviction that he is a prophet, that he must be so and that he cannot but be so. This conviction is rare and cannot be realised except by the sacrifices which he makes for his vocation.

It is the same for true science as well as for real art. Lulli despite all risks and perils, left his profession as a cook and took to the violin; by the sacrifices that he made he justified his title to the musical vocation. But our ordinary student of a conservatoire, one whose sole duty is to study the things that are taught, is not in the state of giving proof of his vocational zeal, he simply profits by the position which seems to him nice and advantageous.

Manual work is a duty as well as a blessing to all;

intellectual activity is something exceptional which becomes a duty and a blessing only to those persons who have that vocation. That vocation cannot be tested and known except by the sacrifice which the scholar and the artist make of their repose and their prosperity in order to pursue their vocation. A person, who continues to fulfil his duty of sustaining life by the works of his hands, and yet devotes the hours of his repose and of sleep to thinking and creating in the sphere of intellect, has given proof of his vocation. But one who frees himself from the moral obligations of each individual and under the pretext of his taste for science and art, takes to the life of a parasite, would produce nothing but false science and false art.

True science and true art are the products of sacrifice and not of certain material advantages.

But what happens then to science and art? How many times have I listened to this question made by people who have neither any pre-occupation for nor any clear idea whatever of science and art! One would be inclined to believe that those people have nothing so near to their heart as the well-being of humanity which, according to their belief, could not have evolved except by the development of those things which they call Science and Art.

But how is it that we find people so stupid as to contest the utility of science and art, as well as people still more comic who believe it to be their duty to defend them? There are manual labourers, agricultural labourers. No one bothers about contesting their utility and never would a labourer take it into his head to prove the utility of his work. He simply pro-

duces; his production is necessary and is good for others. We profit by it and never doubt its utility, still less, attempt to prove the same.

The workers in the realm of art and science also are in the same condition. But how is it that we see people straining all their powers to prove the utility of Science and Art?

The reason is that real labourers in the field of science and of art do not arrogate to themselves any special rights, they give the products of their work which are useful and they do not feel the need for any special right and to prove their rights. But the great majority of those who call themselves scholars and artists, know quite well, that what they produce is not worth the things they consume in society, and probably because of that, they take so much pains, like the priests of all ages, to prove that their activity is indispensable for the well-being of Humanity.

Real science and real art always existed and will exist always like the other modes of human activity and it is impossible and useless either to prove or to disprove them.

That science and art play a false role in our society is the result of the fact that the so-called civilised people, headed by the scholars and artists, form a caste of their own, privileged like the priests. This caste has all the defects of other castes, lowering and degrading the very principles under which they organise themselves. Thus we get in place of true religion a false one, in place of true science a false one, and the same we find in Art. It has the fault of weighing heavily on the masses and even more, of

depriving them of that very thing which one pretends to propagate among them. This contradiction between the principles professed and their practice is the greatest weakness of the case.

Excepting those who maintain the inept principle of science for science's and art for art's sake, the champions of civilization are obliged to affirm that science and art are great assets for Humanity. In what sense are they assets? What are the signs by which we can distinguish the good from the evil? These are questions to which the champions of science and art do not care to reply. They even pretend to say that a definition of the good and the beautiful is impossible; generally speaking, they cannot be defined.

But those who speak like that do not speak the truth. In all ages, Humanity has done nothing in course of its progress but to define what is Beauty and what is Goodness. But that definition does not suit the champions of culture, for it unmasks the futility, if not the injuriousness of opposing to Goodness and Beauty, what they call their Science and Art. The Good and the Beautiful have been defined through centuries. The Brahman and the Buddhist sages, the Chinese, the Hebrew and the Egyptian sages: the Greek stoics and the Christian Bible, all have defined them in a precise way.

*All that tends to unify mankind belongs to the Good and the Beautiful. All that tends to disunite it, is Evil and Ugly.*

The whole of mankind knows this formula. It is inscribed in our heart.

That which unites people is good and beautiful for

Humanity. Well, if the champions of Science and of Art have the good of humanity as their object, they should not ignore it; and if they do not ignore it, they lead to the fulfilment of that object. Then there should not be the judicial science, the military science, the science of political economy and of finance, which have no other object but to secure the prosperity of certain nations at the expense of others. If human welfare had been the ultimate criterion of science and of art, then never would those positive sciences which are completely futile from the point of view of human welfare, have acquired the importance that they have now; so, the products of our arts, which are good more or less to provide excitement to old rakes, or relaxation to comfortable idlers, would never have gained so much popularity.

Human wisdom does not consist solely of the mere knowledge of things. For the things that one may know are infinite and to know the largest amount of things is no wisdom. It consists in knowing the hierarchy of things which it is good to know and in learning to arrange one's knowings according to their importance.

Now of all the science which man can and should know, the principal is the science of loving in such a way as to do the least harm and the utmost good; and of all the arts that of knowing to avoid evil and to produce good, even in the smallest of our efforts. But we find that amongst all the arts and the sciences which pretend to serve Humanity, these very first in science and in art, according to importance, not only do not exist but are excluded from the lists.

What we call science and art, in our society, is nothing but stupendous humbug, a huge superstition into which we fall ordinarily, as soon as we get out of the old superstition of the church. To see clearly the route which we should follow, we must begin at the very beginning, removing the eye-preserver which is comfortable, no doubt, but which obstructs the vision. The temptation is great. We live, either by labour or by some intellectual application; we raise ourselves gradually in the social scale; and we find ourselves amongst the privileged, the priests of civilization, the *cultured*, as the Germans say. And to doubt the principles which had given us that position of advantage, requires, as it does in the case of a Brahmin or a Catholic priest, much sincerity and great love of truth and goodness. But for a serious man like you, Mon. Rolland, who questions Life, there is no other choice. In order to see clearly we must free our mind from the superstitions in which we are steeped, however profitable they might be. That is the condition *sine qua non*. It is useless to discuss with a man who holds blindly to a fixed creed even on a single question.

If the field of reasoning is not completely free, there may be fine discussions, fine argumentations, and yet we may not move towards Truth even one step. The fixed point would arrest all the reasonings and falsify them. There are creeds of religion and creeds of our civilization; both are quite analogous. A Catholic would say "I may reason, but not beyond that what my scripture and our tradition teach me; they contain the whole and immutable Truth." A devotee of Civilization would say: "My reasoning stops before the

data of civilization: Science and Art. Our Science does not possess as yet the whole verity, she will do so in future. Our art with its classical traditions is the only true art." The Catholics say : "Outside man there exists only one thing complete in itself, as the Germans say, it is the *Church*." The man of the world says: "Outside man the only thing that exists is *Civilization*".

It is easy for us to see the faults of reasoning in religious superstitions, because we do no longer share them. But a believing monk, or even a Catholic is fully convinced that there can be only the religion or truth professed by him! And it even seems to him that the verity of his religion proves itself by reasoning. It is the same with us, believers in *Civilization*. We are fully convinced that there exists only one true civilization—our own! And it is almost impossible to see the illogicality of all our reasonings which do nothing but prove that of all the ages and of all the peoples, there is only our age and a few millions of creatures inhabiting the peninsula which is called Europe, that finds itself in possession of the only true civilization composed of true sciences and real arts.

For knowing the truth of life which is so simple, it is not absolutely necessary to have something positive: a profound knowledge, a philosophy—, it is necessary only to have the negative virtue: of *not having Superstition*. One must place oneself in the state of a child, or of Descartes saying: I know nothing, I believe nothing, and I do not wish anything but the knowledge of the truth of life which I am compelled to live.

And the reply given is complete for centuries, and it is simple and clear.

My personal interest prompts that I must have all wealth and good fortune for my own self. The reason speaks that all creatures, all beings desire the same thing. So all the souls that are like me in search of their individual happiness, would crush me, that is clear. I cannot possess singly the happiness that I desire. But the searching after happiness is Life. Not to be able to possess happiness, not even to attempt for it, is not to live.

The reasoning says that in the order of the world where all creatures desire only their own good, myself, a being desiring the same thing, cannot have it, therefore I cannot live. But in spite of this clear argumentation we continue to live and to seek for happiness! We say: I would never have good fortune and be happy except in the case in which all other beings would love me more than they love themselves. That is something impossible. But in spite of that we all live together: and all our activity, our searching of fortune, of glory, of power, are nothing but attempts to make ourselves loved by others more than they love themselves. Fortune, glory, power give me but the appearances of that state of things, and we are almost happy, and we almost forget for the moment that they are but appearances and not the reality. All beings love themselves more than they do love us and happiness is impossible. There are people—and their number increases from day to day—who cannot solve this difficulty, and burn their head while saying that life is nothing but a mockery.



And yet, the solution of the problem is more than simple and offers itself spontaneously to us. I can never be happy except under a condition of the world wherein *all beings would love the others more than they love themselves*. If this thing is realised then the entire universe would be happy.

I am a human being and Reason gives me the law of happiness for all beings. I must then follow the law of my reason—that *I love others more than I love my own self*.

Let but man follow this line of reasoning and Life would appear before him in quite a different aspect than ever before. The creatures destroy one another, no doubt, but they also love one another and practise mutual aid. Life is not sustained by destruction but by Reciprocity of love amongst living beings and this is translated within my heart into Love. So far as I could survey the march of the world, I see that the progress of Humanity is due to this principle of Reciprocation. Our History is nothing but the progressive clearing up of the conception and application of this unique principle of the *Solidarity of all beings*. This reasoning is corroborated by the experience of History as well as by personal realisation. But beyond reasoning, man finds the most convincing proof of the truth of that reasoning in his intimate feelings of the heart. The greatest happiness that man knows, the largest freedom, the utmost joy, is in Abnegation and in Love. Reason discovers for man only way to happiness, and the feelings also push him to that conclusion.

If the ideas that I strive to communicate to you, appear not so clear, please do not judge them too severely. I hope that you will read them some day in a way more clear and definite. I only wished to give you an idea of my way of seeing things.

LEO TOLSTOY

*(Translated by Dr. Kalidas Nag from the original French)*

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